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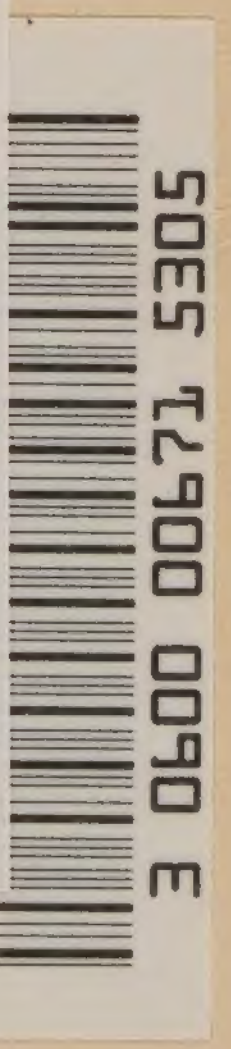

two
sought
adventure

two sought adventure

exploits of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser

by fritz leiber

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induction

SUNDERED from us by gulfs of time and stranger dimensions dreams the ancient world of Nehwon with its towers and jewels, its swords and sorceries. Nehwon's known realms crowd about the Inner Sea: northward the green-forested fierce Land of the Eight Cities, eastward the steppe-dwelling Mingol horsemen and the desert where caravans creep from the rich Eastern Lands and the River Tilth. But southward, linked to the desert only by the Sinking Land and further warded by the Great Dike and the Mountain of Hunger, are the rich grainfields and walled cities of Lankhmar, eldest and chiefest of Nehwon's lands. Dominating the Land of Lankhmar and crouching at the silty mouth of the River Hlal in a secure corner between the grainfields, the Great Salt Marsh and the Inner Sea is the massive-walled and mazy-alleyed metropolis of Lankhmar, thick with thieves and shaven priests, lean-framed magicians and fat-bellied merchants—Lankhmar the Imperishable, the City of the Black Toga.

In Lankhmar on one market night, if we can believe the runic books of Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, there met for the first time those two dubious heroes and whimsical scoundrels, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. Fafhrd's origins were easy to perceive in his near seven-foot height and limber-looking ranginess, his hammered ornaments and huge longsword: he was clearly a barbarian from the Cold Waste north even of the Eight Cities and the Trollstep Mountains. The Mouser's antecedents were more cryptic and hardly to be deduced from his childlike stature, gray garb, mouse-skin hood shadowing flat swart face, and deceptively dainty rapier; but somewhere about him was the suggestion of cities and the south, the dark streets and

also the sun-drenched spaces. As the twain eyed each other challengingly through the torchlit fog, they were already dimly aware that they were two long-sundered matching fragments of a greater hero and that each had found a comrade who would outlast a thousand quests and a lifetime of adventuring.

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Little is known of the earliest shared exploits of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, although Sheelba refers to a conquest achieved among the baldest rats and it may have been during this period that they encountered Ningauble of the Seven Eyes. Certainly they were well-tempered companions, wise in each other's ways, when circumstances led them southward from Lankhmar City across the grainfields in the general direction of the Lakes of Pleea and the mystery-haunted region of Quarmall.

the jewels in the forest

IT was the Year of the Behemoth, the Month of the Hedgehog, the Day of the Toad. A hot, late summer sun was sinking down toward evening over the somber, fertile land of Lankhmar. Peasants toiling in the endless grain fields paused for a moment and lifted their earth-stained faces and noted that it would soon be time to commence lesser chores. Cattle cropping the stubble began to move in the general direction of home. Sweaty merchants and shopkeepers decided to wait a little longer before enjoying the pleasures of the bath. Thieves and astrologers moved restlessly in their sleep, sensing that the hours of night and work were drawing near.

At the southernmost limit of the land of Lankhmar, a day's ride beyond the village of Soreev, where the grain fields gave way to rolling forests of maple and oak, two horsemen cantered leisurely along a narrow, dusty road. They presented a sharp contrast. The larger wore a tunic of unbleached linen, drawn tight at the waist by a very broad leather belt. A fold of linen cloak was looped over his head as a protection against the sun. A long sword with a pomegranate-shaped golden pommel was strapped to his side. Behind his right shoulder a quiver of arrows jutted up. Half sheathed in a saddlecase was a thick yew bow, un-

strung. His great, lean muscles, white skin, copper hair, green eyes, and above all the pleasant, yet untamed expression of his massive countenance, all hinted at a land of origin colder, rougher, and more barbarous than that of Lankhmar.

Even as everything about the larger man suggested the wilderness, so the general appearance of the smaller man —and he was considerably smaller—spoke of the city. His dark face was that of a jester. Bright, black eyes, snub nose, and little lines of irony about the mouth. Hands of a conjurer. Something about the set of his wiry frame betokening exceptional competence in street fights and tavern brawls. He was clad from head to foot in garments of gray silk, soft and curiously loose of weave. His slim sword, cased in gray mouse skin, was slightly curved toward the tip. From his belt hung a sling and a pouch of missiles.

Despite their many dissimilarities, it was obvious that the two men were comrades, that they were united by a bond of subtle mutual understanding. The smaller rode a dappled gray mare; the larger, a chestnut gelding.

They were nearing a point where the narrow road came to the end of a rise, made a slight turn, and wound down into the next valley. Green walls of leaves pressed in on either side. The heat was considerable, but not oppressive. It brought to mind thoughts of satyrs and centaurs dozing in hidden glades.

Then the gray mare, slightly in the lead, whinnied. The smaller man tightened his hold on the reins, his black eyes darting quick, alert glances, first to one side of the road and then to the other. There was a faint scraping sound, as of wood on wood.

Without warning the two men ducked down, clinging to the side harness of their horses. Simultaneously came the musical twang of bowstrings, like the prelude of some forest concert, and several arrows buzzed angrily through the spaces that had just been vacated. Then the mare and the gelding were around the turn and galloping like the wind, their hoofs striking up great puffs of dust.

From behind came excited shouts and answers as the

pursuit got under way. There seemed to have been fully seven or eight men in the ambuscade—squat, sturdy rogues wearing chain-mail shirts and steel caps. Before the mare and the gelding had gone a stone's throw down the road, they were out and after, a black horse in the lead, a black-bearded rider second.

But those pursued were not wasting time. The larger man rose to a stand in his stirrups, whipping the yew bow from its case. With his left hand he bent it against the stirrup, with his right he drew the upper loop of the string into place. Then his left hand slipped down the bow to the grip and his right reached smoothly back over his shoulder for an arrow. Still guiding his horse with his knees, he rose even higher and turned in his saddle and sent an eagle-feathered shaft whirring. Meanwhile his comrade had placed a small leaden ball in his sling, whirled it twice about his head, so that it hummed stridently, and loosed his cast.

Arrow and missile sped and struck together. The one pierced the shoulder of the leading horseman and the other smote the second on his steel cap and tumbled him from his saddle. The pursuit halted abruptly in a tangle of plunging and rearing horses. The men who had caused this confusion pulled up at the next bend in the road and turned back to watch.

"By the Hedgehog," said the smaller, grinning wickedly, "but they will think twice before they play at ambuscades again!"

"Blundering fools," said the larger. "Haven't they even learned to shoot from their saddles? I tell you, Gray Mouser, it takes a barbarian to fight his horse properly."

"Except for myself and a few other people," replied the one who bore the feline nickname of Gray Mouser. "But look, Fafhrd, the rogues retreat bearing their wounded, and one gallops far ahead. *Tcha,* but I dinted black beard's pate for him. He hangs over his nag like a bag of meal. If he'd have known who we were, he wouldn't have been so hot on the chase."

There was some truth to this last boast. The names of

the Gray Mouser and the northerner Fafhrd were not unknown in the lands around Lankhmar and in proud Lankhmar, too. Their taste for strange adventure, their mysterious comings and goings, and their odd sense of humor were matters that puzzled almost all men alike.

Abruptly Fafhrd unstrung his bow and turned forward in his saddle.

"This should be the very valley we are seeking," he said. "See, there are the two double-humped hills of which the document speaks. Let's have another look at it, to test my guess."

The Gray Mouser reached into his capacious leather pouch and withdrew a page of thick vellum, ancient and curiously greenish. Three edges were frayed and worn; the fourth showed a clean and recent cut. It was inscribed with the intricate hieroglyphs of Lankhmarian writing, done in the black ink of the squid. But it was not to these that the Mouser turned his attention, but to several faint lines of diminutive red script, written into the margin. These he read.

> "Let kings stack their treasure houses ceiling-high, and merchants burst their vaults with hoarded coin, and fools envy them. I have a treasure that outvalues theirs. A diamond as big as a man's skull. Twelve rubies each as big as the skull of a cat. Seventeen emeralds each as big as the skull of a mole. And certain rods of crystal and bars of orichalchum. Let overlords swagger jewel-bedecked and queens load themselves with gems, and fools adore them. I have a treasure that will outlast theirs. A treasure house have I builded for it in the far southern forest, where the two hills hump double, like sleeping camels, a day's ride beyond the village of Soreev.
>
> "A great treasure house with a high tower, fit for a king's dwelling—yet no king may dwell there. Immediately below the keystone of the chief dome my treasure lies hid, eternal as the glittering stars. It will outlast me and my name, I, Urgaan of Angamgi.

It is my hold on the future. Let fools seek it. They shall win it not. For although my treasure house be empty as air, yet have I left a guardian there. Let the wise read this riddle and forbear."

"The man's mind runs to skulls," muttered the Mouser. "He must have been a gravedigger or a necromancer."

"Or an architect," observed Farfhrd thoughtfully, "in those past days when graven images of the skulls of men and animals served to bedeck temples."

"Perhaps," agreed the Mouser. "Surely the writing and ink are old enough. They date at least as far back as the Century of the Wars with the East—five long life-spans."

The Mouser was an accomplished forger, both of handwriting and of objects of art. He knew what he was talking about.

Satisfied that they were near the goal of their quest, the two comrades gazed through a break in the foliage down into the valley. It was shaped like the inside of a pod—shallow, long, and narrow. They were viewing it from one of the narrow ends. The two peculiarly humped hills formed the long sides. The whole of the valley was green with maple and oak, save for a small gap toward the middle. That, thought the Mouser, might mark a peasant's dwelling and the cleared space around it.

Beyond the gap he could make out something dark and squarish rising a little above the treetops. He called his companion's attention to it, but they could not decide whether it was indeed a tower such as the document mentioned, or just a peculiar shadow, or perhaps even the dead, limbless trunk of a gigantic oak. It was too far away.

"Almost sufficient time has passed," said Fafhrd, after a pause, "for one of those rogues to have sneaked up through the forest for another shot at us. Evening draws near."

They spoke to their horses and moved on slowly. They tried to keep their eyes fixed on the thing that looked like a tower, but since they were descending, it almost

immediately dropped out of sight below the treetops. There would be no further chance of seeing it until they were quite close at hand.

The Mouser felt a subdued excitement running through his flesh. Soon they would discover if there were a treasure to be had or not. A diamond as big as a man's skull—rubies—emeralds—— He found an almost nostalgic delight in prolonging and savoring to the full this last, leisurely stage of their quest. The recent ambuscade served as a necessary spice.

He thought of how he had slit the interesting-looking vellum page from the ancient book on architecture that reposed in the library of the rapacious and overbearing Lord Rannarsh. Of how, half in jest, he had sought out and interrogated several peddlers from the South. Of how he had found one who had recently passed through a village named Soreev. Of how that one had told him of a stone structure in the forest south of Soreev, called by the peasants the House of Angarngi and reputed to be long deserted. The peddler had seen a high tower rising above the trees. The Mouser recalled the man's wizened, cunning face and chuckled. And that brought to mind the greedy, sallow face of Lord Rannarsh, and a new thought occurred to him.

"Fafhrd," he said, "those rogues we just now put to flight—what did you take them for?"

The northerner grunted humorous contempt.

"Run-of-the-manger ruffians. Waylayers of fat merchants. Pasture bravos. Bumpkin bandits!"

"Still, they were all well armed, and armed alike—as if they were in some rich man's service. And that one who rode far ahead. Mightn't he have been hastening to report failure to some master?"

"What is your thought?"

The Mouser did not reply for some moments.

"I was thinking," he said, "that Lord Rannarsh is a rich man and a greedy one, who slavers at the thought of jewels. And I was wondering if he ever read those

faint lines of red lettering and made a copy of them, and if my theft of the original sharpened his interest."

The northerner shook his head.

"I doubt it. You are oversubtle. But if he did, and if he seeks to rival us in this treasure quest, he'd best watch each step twice—and choose servitors who can fight on horseback."

They were moving so slowly that the hoofs of the mare and the gelding hardly stirred up the dust. They had no fear of danger from the rear. A well-laid ambuscade might surprise them, but not a man or horse in motion. The narrow road wound along in a purposeless fashion. Leaves brushed their faces, and occasionally they had to swing their bodies out of the way of encroaching branches. The ripe, dryish scent of the late summer forest was intensified now that they were below the rim of the valley. Mingled with it were whiffs of wild berries and aromatic shrubs. Shadows imperceptibly lengthened.

"Nine chances out of ten," murmured the Mouser dreamily, "the treasure house of Urgaan of Angarngi was looted some hundred years ago, by men whose bodies are already dust."

"It may be so," agreed Fafhrd. "Unlike men, rubies and emeralds do not rest quietly in their graves."

This possibility, which they had discussed several times before, did not disturb them now, or make them impatient. Rather did it impart to their quest the pleasant melancholy of a lost hope. They drank in the rich air and let their horses munch random mouthfuls of leaves. A jay called shrilly from overhead and off in the forest a catbird was chattering, their sharp voices breaking in on the low buzzing and droning of the insects. Night was drawing near. The almost-horizontal rays of the sun gilded the treetops. Then Fafhrd's sharp ears caught the hollow lowing of a cow.

A few more turns brought them into the clearing they had spied. In line with their surmise, it proved to contain a peasant's cottage—a neat little low-eaved house of

weathered wood, situated in the midst of an acre of grain. To one side was a bean patch; to the other, a woodpile which almost dwarfed the house. In front of the cottage stood a wiry old man, his skin as brown as his homespun tunic. He had evidently just heard the horses and turned around to look.

"Ho, father," called the Mouser, "it's a good day to be abroad in, and a good home you have here."

The peasant considered these statements and then nodded his head in agreement.

"We are two weary travelers," continued the Mouser.

Again the peasant nodded gravely.

"In return for two silver coins will you give us lodging for the night?"

The peasant rubbed his chin and then held up three fingers.

"Very well, you shall have three silver coins," said the Mouser, slipping from his horse. Fafhrd followed suit.

Only after giving the old man a coin to seal the bargain, did the Mouser question casually, "Is there not an old, deserted place near your dwelling called the House of Angarngi?"

The peasant nodded.

"What's it like?"

The peasant shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't you know?"

The peasant shook his head.

"But haven't you ever seen the place?" The Mouser's voice carried a note of amazement he did not bother to conceal.

He was answered by another head-shake.

"But father, it's only a few minutes' walk from your dwelling, isn't it?"

The peasant nodded tranquilly, as if the whole business were no matter for surprise.

A muscular young man, who had come from behind the cottage to take their horses, offered a suggestion.

"You can see tower from other side the house. I can point her out."

At this the old man proved he was not completely speechless by saying in a dry, expressionless voice: "Go ahead. Look at her all you want."

And he stepped into the cottage. Fafhrd and the Mouser caught a glimpse of a child peering around the door, an old woman stirring a pot, and someone hunched in a big chair before the tiny fire.

The upper part of the tower proved to be barely visible through a break in the trees. The last rays of the sun touched it with deep red. It looked about four or five bowshots distant. And then, even as they watched, the sun dipped under and it became a featureless square of black stone.

"She's an old place," explained the young man vaguely. "I been all around her. Father, he's just never bothered to look."

"You've been inside?" questioned the Mouser.

The young man scratched his head doubtfully.

"No. She's just an old place. No good for anything."

"There'll be a fairly long twilight," said Fafhrd, his wide green eyes drawn to the tower as if by a lodestone. "Long enough for us to have a closer look."

"I'd show the way," said the young man, "save I got water to fetch."

"No matter," replied Fafhrd. "When's supper?"

"When first stars show."

They left him holding their horses and walked straight into the woods. Immediately it became much darker, as if twilight were almost over, rather than just begun. The vegetation proved to be somewhat thicker than they had anticipated. There were vines and thorns to be avoided. Irregular, pale patches of sky appeared and disappeared overhead.

The Mouser let Fafhrd lead the way. His mind was occupied with a queer sort of reverie about the peasants. It tickled his fancy to think how they had stolidly lived their toilsome lives, generation after generation, only a few steps from what might be one of the greatest treasure-troves in the world. It seemed incredible. How could

people sleep so near jewels and not dream of them? But probably they never dreamed.

So the Gray Mouser was sharply aware of few things during the journey through the woods, save that Fafhrd seemed to be taking a long time—which was strange, since the barbarian was an accomplished woodsman.

Finally a deeper and more solid shadow loomed up through the trees, and in a moment they were standing in the margin of a small, boulder-studded clearing, most of which was occupied by the bulky structure they sought. Abruptly, even before his eyes took in the details of the place, the Mouser's mind was filled with a hundred petty perturbations. Weren't they making a mistake in leaving their horses with those strange peasants? And mightn't those rogues have followed them to the cottage? And wasn't this the Day of the Toad, an unlucky day for entering deserted houses? And shouldn't they have a short spear along, in case they met a leopard? And wasn't that a whippoorwill he heard crying on his left hand, an augury of ill omen?

The treasure house of Urgaan of Angarngi was a peculiar structure. The main feature was a large, shallow dome, resting on walls that formed an octagon. In front, and merging into it, were two lesser domes. Between these gaped a great square doorway. The tower rose asymmetrically from the rear part of the chief dome. The eyes of the Mouser sought hurriedly through the dimming twilight for the cause of the salient peculiarity of the structure, and decided it lay in the utter simplicity. There were no pillars, no outjutting cornices, no friezes, no architectural ornaments of any sort, skull-embellished or otherwise. Save for the doorway and a few tiny windows set in unexpected places, the House of Angarngi was a compact mass of uniformly dark gray stones.

But now Fafhrd was striding up the short flight of terraced steps that led toward the open door, and the Mouser followed him, although he would have liked to spy around a little longer. With every step he took forward he sensed an odd reluctance growing within him. His earlier mood

of pleasant expectancy vanished as suddenly as if he'd stepped into quicksand. It seemed to him that the black doorway yawned like a toothless mouth. And then a little shudder went through him, for he saw the mouth had a tooth—a bit of ghostly white that jutted up from the floor. Fafhrd was reaching down toward the object.

"I wonder whose skull this may be?" said the northerner calmly.

The Mouser regarded the thing, and the scattering of bones and fragments of bone beside it. His feeling of uneasiness was fast growing toward a climax, and he had the unpleasant conviction that, once it did reach a climax, something would happen. What was the answer to Fafhrd's question? What form of death had struck down that earlier intruder? It was very dark inside the treasure house. Didn't the manuscript mention something about a guardian? It was hard to think of a flesh-and-blood guardian persisting for three hundred years, but there were things that were immortal or nearly immortal. He could tell that Fafhrd was not in the least affected by any premonitory disquietude, and was quite capable of instituting an immediate search for the treasure. That must be prevented at all costs. He remembered that the northerner loathed snakes.

"This cold, damp stone," he observed casually. "Just the place for snakes."

"Nothing of the sort," replied Fafhrd angrily. "I'm willing to wager there's not a single serpent inside."

But a moment later he was agreeing it would be well to postpone the search until daylight returned, now that the treasure house was located.

As they re-entered the woods, the Mouser heard a little inner voice whispering to him, "Just in time. Just in time." Then the sense of uneasiness departed as suddenly as it had come, and he began to feel somewhat ridiculous. This caused him to sing a bawdy ballad of his own invention, wherein demons and other supernatural agents were ridiculed obscenely. Fafhrd chimed in good-naturedly on the choruses.

It was not as dark as they expected when they reached the cottage. They saw to their horses, found they had been well cared for, and then fell to the savory mess of beans, porridge, and pot herbs that the peasant's wife ladled into oak bowls. Fresh milk to wash it down was provided in quaintly carved oak goblets. The meal was a satisfying one and the interior of the house was neat and clean, despite its stamped earthen floor and low beams, which Fafhrd had to duck.

There turned out to be six in the family, all told. The father, his equally thin and leathery wife, the older son, a young boy, a daughter, and a mumbling grandfather, whom extreme age confined to a chair before the fire. The last two were the most interesting of the lot.

The girl was in the gawkish age of mid-adolescence, but there was a wild, coltish grace to the way she moved her lanky legs and the slim arms with their prominent elbows. She was very shy, and gave the impression that at any moment she might dart out the door and into the woods.

In order to amuse her and win her confidence, the Mouser began to perform small feats of legerdemain, plucking copper coins out of the ears of the astonished peasant, and bone needles from the nose of his giggling wife. He turned beans into buttons and back again into beans, swallowed a large fork, made a tiny wooden manikin jig on the palm of his hand, and utterly bewildered the cat by pulling what seemed to be a mouse out of its mouth.

The old folks gaped and grinned. The little boy became frantic with excitement. His sister watched everything with concentrated interest, and even smiled warmly when the Mouser presented her with a square of fine, green linen he had conjured from the air, although she was still too shy to speak.

Then Fafhrd roared sea-chanteys that rocked the roof and sang lusty songs that set the old grandfather gurgling with delight. Meanwhile the Mouser fetched a small wineskin from his saddlebags, concealed it under his cloak, and filled the oak goblets as if by magic. These rapidly

fuddled the peasants, who were unused to so potent a beverage, and by the time Fafhrd had finished telling a bloodcurdling tale of the frozen north, they were all nodding, save the girl and the grandfather.

The latter looked up at the merry-making adventurers, his watery eyes filled with a kind of impish, senile glee, and mumbled, "You two be right clever men. Maybe you be beast-dodgers." But before this remark could be elucidated, his eyes had gone vacant again, and in a few moments he was snoring.

Soon all were asleep, Fafhrd and the Mouser keeping their weapons close at hand, but only variegated snores and occasional snaps from the dying embers disturbed the silence of the cottage.

The Day of the Cat dawned clear and cool. The Mouser stretched himself luxuriously and, catlike, flexed his muscles and sucked in the sweet, dewy air. He felt exceptionally cheerful and eager to be up and doing. Was not this *his* day, the day of the Gray Mouser, a day in which luck could not fail him?

His slight movements awakened Fafhrd and together they stole silently from the cottage so as not to disturb the peasants, who were oversleeping with the wine they had taken. They refreshed their faces and hands in the wet grass and visited their horses. Then they munched some bread, washed it down with drafts of cool well water flavored with wine, and made ready to depart.

This time their preparations were well thought out. The Mouser carried a mallet and a stout iron pry-bar, in case they had to attack masonry, and made certain that candles, flint, wedges, chisels, and several other small tools were in his pouch. Fafhrd borrowed a pick from the peasant's implements and tucked a coil of thin, strong rope in his belt. He also took his bow and quiver of arrows.

The forest was delightful at this early hour. Bird cries and chatterings came from overhead, and once they glimpsed a black, squirrellike animal scampering along a bough. A couple of chipmunks scurried under a bush dotted with red berries. What had been shadow the evening before

was now a variety of green-leafed beauty. The two adventurers trod softly.

They had hardly gone more than a bowshot into the woods, when they heard a faint rustling behind them. The rustling came rapidly nearer, and suddenly the peasant girl burst into view. She stood breathless and poised, one hand touching a tree trunk, the other pressing some leaves, ready to fly away at the first sudden move. Fafhrd and the Mouser stood as stock-still as if she were a doe or a dryad. Finally she managed to conquer her shyness and speak.

"You go there?" she questioned, indicating the direction of the treasure house with a quick, ducking nod. Her dark eyes were serious.

"Yes, we go there," answered Fafhrd, smiling.

"Don't." This word was accompanied by a rapid head-shake.

"But why shouldn't we, girl?" Fafhrd's voice was gentle and sonorous, like an integral part of the forest. It seemed to touch some spring within the girl that enabled her to feel more at ease. She gulped a big breath and began.

"Because I watch it from edge of the forest, but never go close. Never, never, never. I say to myself there be a magic circle I must not cross. And I say to myself there be a giant inside. Queer and fearsome giant." Her words were coming rapidly now, like an undammed stream. "All gray he be, like the stone of his house. All gray—eyes and hair and fingernails, too. And he has a stone club as big as a tree. And he be big, bigger than you, twice as big." Here she nodded at Fafhrd. "And with his club he kills, kills, kills. But only if you go close. Every day, almost, I play a game with him. I pretend to be going to cross the magic circle. And he watches from inside the door, where I can't see him, and he think I'm going to cross. And I dance through the forest all around the house, and he follows me, peering from the little windows. And I get closer and closer to the circle, closer and closer. But I never cross. And he be very angry and gnash his teeth, like rocks rubbing rocks, so that the house shakes. And

I run, run, run away. But you mustn't go inside. Oh, you mustn't."

She paused, as if startled by her own daring. Her eyes were fixed anxiously on Fafhrd. She seemed drawn toward him. The northerner's reply carried no overtone of patronizing laughter.

"But you've never actually seen the gray giant, have you?"

"Oh, no. He be too cunning. But I say to myself he must be there inside. And that's the same thing, isn't it? Grandfather knows about him. We used to talk about him, when I was little. Grandfather calls him the beast. But the others laugh at me, so I don't tell."

Here was another astounding peasant-paradox, thought the Mouser with an inward grin. Imagination was such a rare commodity with them that this girl unhesitatingly took it for reality.

"Don't worry about us, girl. We'll be on the watch for your gray giant," he started to say, but he had less success than Fafhrd in keeping his voice completely natural or else the cadence of his words didn't chime so well with the forest setting.

The girl uttered one more warning, "Don't go inside, oh, please," and turned and darted away.

The two adventurers looked at each other and smiled. Somehow the unexpected fairy tale, with its conventional ogre and its charmingly naïve narrator added to the delight of the dewy morning. Without a comment they resumed their soft-stepping progress. And it was well that they went quietly, for when they had gotten within a stone's throw of the clearing, they heard low voices that seemed to be in grumbling argument. Immediately they cached the pick and pry-bar and mallet under a clump of bushes, and stole forward, taking advantage of the natural cover and watching where they planted their feet.

On the edge of the clearing stood half a dozen stocky men in black chain-mail shirts, bows on their backs, short swords at their sides. They were immediately recognizable as the rogues who had laid the ambuscade. Two of them

started for the treasure house, only to be recalled by a comrade. Whereupon the argument apparently started afresh.

"That red-haired one," whispered the Mouser after an unhurried look. "I can swear I've seen him in the stables of Lord Rannarsh. My guess was right. It seems we have a rival."

"Why do they wait, and keep pointing at the house?" whispered Fafhrd. "Is it because some of their comrades are already at work inside?"

The Mouser shook his head. "That cannot be. See those picks and shovels and levers they have rested on the ground? No, they wait for someone—for a leader. Some of them want to examine the house before he arrives. Others counsel against it. And I will bet my head against a bowling ball that the leader is Rannarsh himself. He is much too greedy and suspicious to intrust a treasure quest to any henchman."

"What's to do?" murmured Fafhrd. "We cannot enter the house unseen, even if it were the wise course, which it isn't. Once in, we'd be trapped."

"I've half a mind to loose my sling at them right now and teach them something about the art of ambuscade," replied the Mouser, slitting his eyes grimly. "Only then the survivors would flee into the house and hold us off until, mayhap, Rannarsh came, and more men with him."

"We might circle part way round the clearing," said Fafhrd, after a moment's pause, "keeping to the woods. Then we can enter the clearing unseen and shelter ourselves behind one of the small domes. In that way we become masters of the doorway, and can prevent their taking cover inside. Thereafter I will address them suddenly and try to frighten them off, you meanwhile staying hid and giving substance to my threats by making enough racket for ten men."

This seemed the handiest plan to both of them, and they managed the first part of it without a hitch. The Mouser crouched behind the small dome, his sword, sling, daggers, and a couple of sticks of wood laid ready for

either noise-making or fight. Then Fafhrd strode briskly forward, his bow held carelessly in front of him, an arrow fitted to the string. It was done so casually that it was a few moments before Rannarsh's henchmen noticed him. Then they quickly reached for their own bows and as quickly desisted when they saw that the huge newcomer had the advantage of them. They scowled in irritated perplexity.

"Ho, rogues!" began Fafhrd, "we allow you just as much time as it will take you to make yourselves scarce, and no more. Don't think to resist or come skulking back. My men are scattered through the woods. At a sign from me they will feather you with arrows."

Meanwhile the Mouser had begun a low din and was slowly and artistically working it up in volume. Rapidly varying the pitch and intonation of his voice and making it echo first from some part of the building and then from the forest wall, he created the illusion of a squad of bloodthirsty bow-men. Nasty cries of "Shall we let fly?" "You take the redhead," and "Try for the belly shot; it's surest," kept coming now from one point and now another, until it was all Fafhrd could do to refrain from laughing at the woebegone, startled glances the six rogues kept darting around. But his merriment was extinguished when, just as the rogues were starting to slink shamefacedly away, an arrow arched erratically out of the woods, passing a spear's length above his head.

"Curse that branch!" came a deep, guttural voice the Mouser recognized as issuing from the throat of Lord Rannarsh. Immediately after, it began to bark commands.

"At them, you fools! It's all a trick. There are only the two of them. Rush them!"

Fafhrd turned without warning and loosed point-blank at the voice, but did not silence it. Then he dodged back behind the small dome and ran with the Mouser for the woods.

The six rogues, wisely deciding that a charge with drawn swords would be overly heroic, followed suit, unslinging their bows as they went. One of them turned

before he had reached sufficient cover, nocking an arrow. It was a mistake. A ball from the Mouser's sling took him low in the forehead, and he toppled forward and was still.

The sound of that hit and fall was the last heard in the clearing for quite a long time, save for the inevitable bird cries, some of which were genuine, and some of which were communications between Fafhrd and the Mouser. The conditions of the death-dealing contest were obvious. Once it had fairly begun, no one dared enter the clearing, since he would become a fatally easy mark; and the Mouser was sure that none of the five remaining rogues had taken shelter in the treasure house. Nor did either side dare withdraw all its men out of sight of the doorway, since that would allow someone to take a commanding position in the top of the tower, providing the tower had a negotiable stair. Therefore it was a case of sneaking about near the edge of the clearing, circling and counter-circling, with a great deal of squatting in a good place and waiting for somebody to come along and be shot.

The Mouser and Fafhrd began by adopting the latter strategy, first moving about twenty paces nearer the point at which the rogues had disappeared. Evidently their patience was a little better than that of their opponents. For after about ten minutes of nerve-wracking waiting, during which pointed seed pods had a queer way of looking like ,arrowheads, Fafhrd got the red-haired henchman full in the throat just as he was bending his bow for a shot at the Mouser. That left four besides Rannarsh himself. Immediately the two adventurers changed their tactics and separated, the Mouser circling rapidly around the treasure house and Fafhrd drawing as far back from the open space as he dared.

Rannarsh's men must have decided on the same plan, for the Mouser almost bumped into a scar-faced rogue as soft-footed as himself. At such close range, bow and sling were both useless—in their normal function. Scar-face attempted to jab the barbed arrow he held into the Mouser's eye. The Mouser weaved his body to one side,

swung his sling like a whip, and felled the man senseless with a blow from the horn handle. Then he retreated a few paces, thanked the Day of the Cat that there had not been two of them, and took to the trees as being a safer, though slower method of progress. Keeping to the middle heights, he scurried along with the sure-footedness of a rope walker, swinging from branch to branch only when it was necessary, making sure he always had more than one way of retreat open.

He had completed three quarters of his circuit when he heard the clash of swords a few trees ahead. He increased his speed and was soon looking down on a sweet little combat. Fafhrd, his back to a great oak, had his broadsword out and was holding off two of Rannarsh's henchmen, who were attacking with their shorter weapons. It was a tight spot and the northerner realized it. He knew that ancient sagas told of heroes who could best four or more men at swordplay. He also knew that such sagas were lies, providing the hero's opponents were reasonably competent.

And Rannarsh's men were veterans. They attacked cautiously but incessantly, keeping their swords well in front of them and never slashing wildly. Their breath whistled through their nostrils, but they were grimly confident, knowing the northerner dared not lunge strongly at one of them because it would lay him wide open to a thrust by the other. Their game was to get one on each side of him and then attack simultaneously.

Fafhrd's counter was to shift position quickly and attack the nearer one murderously before the other could get back in range. In that way he managed to keep them side by side, where he could hold their blades in check by swift feints and crosswise sweeps. Sweat beaded his face and blood dripped from a scratch on his left thigh. A fearsome grin showed his white teeth, which occasionally parted to let slip a base, primitive insult.

The Mouser took in the situation at a glance, descended rapidly to a lower bough, and poised himself, aiming a dagger at the back of one of Fafhrd's adversaries. He was,

however, standing very close to the thick trunk, and round this trunk darted a horny hand tipped with a short sword. The third henchman had also thought it wise to take to the trees. Fortunately for the Mouser, the man was uncertain of his footing and therefore his thrust, although well aimed, came a shade slow. As it was the little gray-clad man only managed to dodge by dropping off.

Thereupon he startled his opponent with a modest acrobatic feat. He did not drop to the ground, knowing that would put everyone at the mercy of the man in the tree. Instead, he grabbed hold of the branch on which he had been standing, swung himself smartly up again, and grappled. Steadying themselves now with one hand, now another, they drove for each other's throat, ramming with knees and elbows whenever they got a chance. At the first onset both dagger and sword were dropped, the latter sticking point down in the ground directly between the two battling henchmen and startling them so that Fafhrd almost got home an attack.

The Mouser and his man surged and rolled along the branch away from the trunk, inflicting little damage on each other since it was hard to keep balance. Finally they slid off at the same time, but grabbed the branch with their hands. The puffing henchman aimed a vicious kick. The Mouser escaped it by yanking up his body and doubling up his legs. The latter he let fly violently, taking the henchman full in the chest. The unfortunate retainer of Rannarsh fell to the ground, where he had the wind knocked out of him a second time.

At the same moment one of Fafhrd's opponents tried a trick that might have turned out well. When his companion was pressing the northerner closely, he snatched for the sword sticking in the ground, intending to hurl it underhanded as if it were a javelin. But Fafhrd, whose superior endurance was rapidly giving him an advantage in speed, anticipated the movement and simultaneously made a brilliant counterattack against the other man.

There were two thrusts, both lightninglike, the first a feint at the belly, the second a slicing stab that sheared through the throat to the spine. Then he whirled around and, with a quick sweep, knocked both weapons out of the hands of the first man, who looked up in bewilderment and promptly collapsed into a sitting position, panting in utter exhaustion.

To cap the situation, the Mouser dropped lightly down, as if out of the sky. Fafhrd automatically started to raise his sword, for a backhand swipe. Then he stared at the Mouser for as long a time as it took the man sitting on the ground to give three tremendous gasps. Then he began to laugh, first uncontrollable snickers and later thundering peals. It was a laughter in which battle-begotten madness, completely sated anger, and relief at escape from death were equally mingled.

"Oh, by Glaggerk and by Kos!" he roared. "By the Behemoth! Oh, by the Cold Waste and the guts of the Red God! Oh! Oh! Oh!" Again the insane bellowing burst out. "Oh, by the Killer Whale and the Cold Woman and her spawn!" By degrees the laughter died away, choking in his throat. He rubbed his forehead with the palm of his hand and his face became starkly grave. Then he knelt beside the man he had just slain, and straightened his limbs, and closed his eyes, and began to weep in a dignified way that would have seemed ridiculous and hypocritical in anyone but a barbarian.

Meanwhile the Mouser's reactions were nowhere near as primitive. He felt worried, ironic, and slightly sick. He understood Fafhrd's emotions, but knew that he would not feel the full force of his own for some time yet, and by then they would be deadened and somewhat choked. He peered about anxiously, fearful of an anticlimactic attack that would find his companion helpless. He counted over the tally of their opponents. Yes, the six henchmen were all accounted for. But Rannarsh himself, where was Rannarsh? He fumbled in his pouch to make sure he had not lost his good-luck talismans and amulets. His lips

moved rapidly as he murmured two or three prayers and cantrips. But all the while he held his sling ready, and his eyes never once ceased their quick shifting.

From the middle of a thick clump of bushes he heard a series of agonized gasps, as the man he had felled from the tree began to regain his wind. The henchman whom Fafhrd had disarmed, his face ashy pale from exhaustion rather than fright, was slowly edging back into the forest. The Mouser watched him carelessly, noting the comical way in which the steel cap had slipped down over his forehead and rested against the bridge of his nose. Meanwhile the gasps of the man in the bushes were taking on a less agonized quality. At almost the same instant, the two rose to their feet and stumbled off into the forest.

The Mouser listened to their blundering retreat. He was sure that there was nothing more to fear from them. *They* wouldn't come back. And then a little smile stole into his face, for he heard the sounds of a third person joining them in their flight. That would be Rannarsh, thought the Mouser, a man cowardly at heart and incapable of carrying on single-handed. It did not occur to him that the third person might be the man he had stunned with his sling handle.

Mostly just to be doing something, he followed them leisurely for a couple of bowshots into the forest. Their trail was impossible to miss, being marked by trampled bushes and thorns bearing tatters of cloth. It led in a beeline away from the clearing. Satisfied, he returned, going out of his way to regain the mallet, pick, and prybar.

He found Fafhrd tying a loose bandage around the scratch on his thigh. The northerner's emotions had run their gamut and he was himself again. The dead man for whom he had been somberly grieving now meant no more to him than food for beetles and birds. Whereas for the Mouser it continued to be a somewhat frightening and sickening object.

"And now do we proceed with our interrupted business?" the Mouser asked.

Fafhrd nodded in a matter-of-fact manner and rose to his feet. Together they entered the rocky clearing. It came to them as a surprise how little time the fight had taken. True, the sun had moved somewhat higher, but the atmosphere was still that of early morning. The dew had not dried yet. The treasure house of Urgaan of Angarngi stood massive, featureless, grotesquely impressive.

"The peasant girl predicted the truth without knowing it," said the Mouser with a smile. "We played her game of 'circle-the-clearing and don't-cross-the-magic-circle,' didn't we?"

The treasure house had no fears for him today. He recalled his perturbations of the previous evening, but was unable to understand them. The very idea of a guardian seemed somewhat ridiculous. There were a hundred other ways of explaining the skeleton inside the doorway.

So this time it was the Mouser who skipped into the treasure house ahead of Fafhrd. The interior was disappointing, being empty of any furnishings and as bare and unornamented as the outside walls. Just a large, low room. To either side square doorways led to the smaller domes, while to the rear a long hallway was dimly apparent, and the beginnings of a stair leading to the upper part of the main dome.

With only a casual glance at the skull and the broken skeleton, the Mouser made his way toward the stair.

"Our document," he said to Fafhrd, who was now beside him, "speaks of the treasure as resting just below the keystone of the chief dome. Therefore we must seek in the room or rooms above."

"True," answered the northerner, glancing around. "But I wonder, Mouser, just what use this structure served. A man who builds a house solely to hide a treasure is shouting to the world that he *has* a treasure. Do you think it might have been a temple?"

The Mouser suddenly shrank back with a sibilant exclamation. Sprawled a little way up the stair was another skeleton, the major bones hanging together in a somewhat lifelike fashion. The whole upper half of the skull

was smashed to fragments.

"Our hosts are overly ancient and indecently naked," hissed the Mouser, angry with himself for being startled. Then he darted up the stairs to examine the grisly find. His sharp eyes picked out several sharp objects among the bones. A rusty dagger, a tarnished gold ring that looped a knucklebone, a handful of horn buttons, and a slim, green-eaten copper cylinder. The last awakened his curiosity. He picked it up, dislodging the bones in the process, so that they fell apart, rattling dryly. He managed to pry off the cap of the cylinder with his dagger point, and shook out a tightly rolled sheet of ancient parchment. This he gingerly unwound. Fafhrd and he scanned the lines of diminutive red lettering by the light from a small window on the landing above.

> Mine is a secret treasure. Orichalchum have I, and crystal, and blood-red amber. Rubies and emeralds that demons would war for, and a diamond as big as the skull of a man. Yet none have seen them save I. I, Urgaan of Angarngi, scorn the flattery and the envy of fools. A fittingly lonely treasure house have I builded for my jewels. There, hidden under the keystone, they may dream unperturbed until earth and sky wear away. A day's ride beyond the village of Soreev, in the valley of the two double-humped hills, lies that house, domed and single-towered. It is empty. Any fool may enter. Let him. I care not.

"The details differ slightly," murmured the Mouser, "but the phrases have the same ring as in our document."

"The man must have been mad," asserted Fafhrd, scowling. "Or else why should he carefully hide a treasure and then, with equal care, leave directions for finding it?"

"We thought *our* document was a memorandum or an oversight," said the Mouser thoughtfully. "Such a notion can hardly explain *two* documents." Lost in speculation, he turned toward the remaining section of the stair, only to find still another skull grinning at him from a shadowy angle. This time he was not startled, yet he experienced

the same feeling that a fly must experience, when, enmeshed in a spider's web, it sees the dangling, empty corpses of a dozen of its brothers. He began to speak rapidly.

"Nor can such a notion explain *three* or *four* or mayhap a *dozen* such documents. For how came these other questers here, unless each had found a written message? Urgaan of Angarngi may have been mad, but he sought deliberately to lure men here. One thing is certain. This house conceals—or did conceal—some deadly trap. Some guardian. Some giant beast, say. Or perhaps the very stones distill a poison. Perhaps hidden springs release sword blades which stab out through cracks in the walls and then return."

"That cannot be," answered Fafhrd. "These men were killed by great, bashing blows. The ribs and spine of the first were splintered. The second had his skull cracked open. And that third one there. See! The bones of his lower body are smashed."

The Mouser started to reply. Then his face broke into an unexpected smile. He could see the conclusion to which Fafhrd's arguments were unconsciously leading—and he knew that that conclusion was ridiculous. What thing would kill with great, bashing blows? What thing but the gray giant the peasant girl had told them about? The gray giant twice as tall as a man, with his great stone club—a giant fit only for fairy tales and fantasies.

And Fafhrd returned the Mouser's smile. It seemed to him that they were making a great deal of fuss about nothing. These skeletons were suggestive enough, to be sure, but did they not represent men who had died many, many years ago—centuries ago? What guardian could outlast three centuries? Why, that was a long enough time to weary the patience of a demon! And there were no such things as demons, anyhow. And there was no earthly use in mucking around about ancient fears and horrors that were as dead as dust. The whole matter, thought Fafhrd, boiled down to something very simple. They had come to an empty house to see if there was a treasure in it.

Agreed upon this point, the two comrades made their way up the remaining section of stair that led to the dimmer regions of the House of Angarngi. Despite their confidence, they moved cautiously and kept sharp watch on the shadows lying ahead. This was wise.

Just as they reached the top, a flash of steel spun out of the darkness. It nicked the Mouser in the shoulder as he twisted to one side. There was a metallic clash as it fell to the stone floor. The Mouser, gripped by a sudden spasm of anger and fright, ducked down and dashed rapidly through the door from which the weapon had come, straight at the danger, whatever it was.

"Dagger-tossing in the dark, eh, you slick-bellied worm?" Fafhrd heard the Mouser cry, and then he, too, had plunged through the door.

Lord Rannarsh cowered against the wall, his rich hunting garb dusty and disordered, his black, wavy hair pushed back from his forehead, his cruelly handsome face a sallow mask of hate and extreme terror. For the moment the latter emotion seemed to predominate and, oddly enough, it did not appear to be directed toward the men he had just assailed, but toward something else, something unapparent.

"O gods!" he cried, "let me go from here. The treasure is yours. Let me out of this place. Else I am doomed. The thing has played at cat and mouse with me. I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it!"

"So now we pipe a different tune, do we?" snarled the Mouser. "First dagger-tossing, then fright and pleas!"

"Filthy coward tricks," added Fafhrd. "Skulking here safe while your henchmen died bravely."

"Safe? Safe, you say? O gods!" Rannarsh almost screamed. Then a subtle change became apparent in his rigid-muscled face. It was not that his terror decreased. If anything, that became greater. But there was added to it, over and above, a consciousness of desperate shame, a realization that he had demeaned himself uneradicably in the eyes of these two ruffians. His lips began to writhe, showing

tight-clenched teeth. He extended his left hand in a gesture of supplication.

"Oh, mercy, have mercy," he cried piteously, and his right hand twitched a second dagger from his belt and hurled it underhand at Fafhrd.

The northerner knocked aside the wapon with a swift blow of his palm, then said deliberately, "He is yours, Mouser. Kill the man."

And now it was cat against cornered rat. Lord Rannarsh whipped a gleaming sword from its gold-worked scabbard and rushed in, cutting, thrusting, stabbing. The Mouser gave ground slightly, his slim blade flickering in a defensive counterattack that was wavering and elusive, yet deadly. He brought Rannarsh's rush to a standstill. His blade moved so quickly that it seemed to weave a net of steel around the man. Then it leaped forward three times in rapid succession. At the first thrust it bent nearly double against a concealed shirt of chain mail. The second thrust pierced the belly. The third transfixed the throat. Lord Rannarsh fell to the floor, spitting and gagging, his fingers clawing at his neck. There he died.

"An evil end," said Fafhrd somberly, "although he had fairer play than he deserved, and handled his sword well. Mouser, I like not this killing, although there was surely more justice to it than the others."

The Mouser, wiping his weapon against his opponent's thigh, understood what Fafhrd meant. He felt no elation at his victory, only a cold, queasy disgust. A moment before he had been raging, but now there was no anger left in him. He pulled open his gray jerkin and inspected the dagger wound in his left shoulder. A little blood was still welling from it and trickling down his arm.

"Lord Rannarsh was no coward," he said slowly. "He killed himself, or at least caused his own death, because we had seen him terrified and heard him cry in fright."

And at these words, without any warning whatsoever, stark terror fell like an icy eclipse upon the hearts of the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd. It was as if Lord Rannarsh had

left them a legacy of fear, which passed to them immediately upon his death. And the unmanning thing about it was that they had no premonitory apprehension, no hint of its approach. It did not take root and grow gradually greater. It came all at once, paralyzing, overwhelming. Worse still, there was no discernible cause. One moment they were looking down with something of indifference upon the twisted corpse of Lord Rannarsh. The next moment their legs were weak, their guts were cold, their spines prickling, their teeth clicking, their hearts pounding, their hair lifting at the roots.

Fafhrd felt as if he had walked unsuspecting into the jaws of a gigantic serpent. His barbaric mind was stirred to the deeps. He thought of the grim god Kos brooding alone in the icy silence of the Cold Waste. He thought of the masked powers Fate and Chance, and of the game they play for the blood and brains of men. And he did not will these thoughts. Rather did the freezing fear seem to crystalize them, so that they rose into consciousness like a chilly fog.

Slowly he regained control over his quaking limbs and twitching muscles. As if in a nightmare, he looked around him slowly, taking in the details of his surroundings. The room they were in was semicircular, forming half of the great dome. Two small windows, high in the curving ceiling, let in light.

An inner voice kept repeating, "Don't make a sudden move. Slowly, Slowly. Above all, don't run. The others did. That was why they died so quickly. Slowly. Slowly."

He saw the Mouser's face. It reflected his own terror. He wondered how much longer this would last, how much longer he could stand it without running amuck, how much longer he could passively endure this feeling of a great invisible paw reaching out over him, inch by inch, implacably.

The faint sound of footsteps came from the room below. Regular and unhurried footsteps. Now they were crossing into the rear hallway below. Now they were on the stairs.

And now they had reached the landing, and were advancing up the second section of the stairs.

The man who entered the room was tall and frail and old and very gaunt. Scant locks of intensely black hair straggled down over his high-domed forehead. His sunken cheeks showed clearly the outlines of his long jawbone, and waxy skin was pulled tight over his small nose. Fanatical eyes burned in deep, bony sockets. He wore the simple, sleeveless robe of a holy man. A pouch hung from the cord round his waist.

He fixed his eyes upon Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser.

"I greet you, men of blood," he said in a hollow voice.

Then his gaze fell with displeasure upon the corpse of Rannarsh.

"More blood has been shed. It is not well."

And with the bony forefinger of his left hand he traced in the air a curious triple square, the sign sacred to the Great God of Lankhmar.

"Do not speak," his calm, toneless voice continued, "for I know your purposes. You have come to take treasure from this house. Others have sought to do the same. They have failed. You will fail. As for myself, I have no lust for treasure. For forty years I have lived on crusts and water, devoting my spirit to the Great God." Again he traced the curious sign. "The gems and ornaments of this world and the jewels and gauds of the world of demons cannot tempt or corrupt me. My purpose in coming here is to destroy an evil thing."

"I"—and here he touched his chest—"I am Arvlan of Angarngi, the ninth lineal descendant of Urgaan of Angarngi. This I always knew, and sorrowed for, because Urgaan of Angarngi was a man of evil. But not until fifteen days ago, on the Day of the Spider, did I discover from ancient documents that Urgaan had built this house, and built it to be an eternal trap for the unwise and venturesome. He has left a guardian here, and that guardian has endured.

"Cunning was my accursed ancestor, Urgaan, cunning

and evil. The most skillful architect in all Lankhmar was Urgaan, a man wise in the ways of stone and learned in geometrical lore. But he scorned the Great God. He lusted after improper powers. He had commerce with demons, and won from them an unnatural treasure. This he hid, but hid in such a way that it would wreck endless evil on the world. It is my purpose and my right to destroy that evil.

"Seek not to dissuade me, lest doom fall upon you. As for me, no harm can befall me. The hand of the Great God is poised above me, ready to ward off any danger that may threaten his faithful servant. His will is my will. Do not speak, men of blood! I go to destroy the treasure of Urgaan of Angarngi."

And with these words the gaunt holy man walked calmly on, with measured stride, like an apparition, and disappeared through the narrow doorway that led into the forward part of the great dome.

Fafhrd stared after him, his green eyes wide, feeling no desire to follow or to interfere. His terror had not left him, but it was transmuted. He was still aware of a dreadful threat, but it no longer seemed to be directed against him personally.

Meanwhile, a most curious notion had lodged in the mind of the Mouser. He felt that he had just now seen, not a venerable holy man, but a dim reflection of the centuries-dead Urgaan of Angarngi. Surely Urgaan had that same high-domed forehead, that same secret pride, that same air of command. And those locks of youthfully black hair, which contrasted so ill with the aged face also seemed part of a picture looming from the past. A picture dimmed and distorted by time, but retaining something of the power and individuality of the ancient original.

They heard the footsteps of the holy man proceed a little way into the other room. Then for the space of a dozen heartbeats there was complete silence. Then the floor began to tremble slightly under their feet, as if the earth were quaking, or as if a giant were treading near. Then there came a single quavering cry from the next room, cut off in

the middle by a single sickening crash that made them lurch. Then, once again, utter silence.

Fafhrd and the Mouser looked at one another in blank amazement—not so much because of what they had just heard but because, almost at the moment of the crash, the pall of terror had lifted from them completely. They jerked out their swords and hurried into the next room.

It was a duplicate of the one they had quitted, save that instead of two small windows, there were three, one of them near the floor. Also, there was but a single door, the one through which they had just entered.

Near the thick center wall, which bisected the dome, lay the body of the holy man. Only "lay" was not the right word. Left shoulder and chest were mashed against the floor.

Set in the wall near his head was a stone about two feet square, jutting out a little from the rest. On this was boldly engraved, in antique Lankhmarian hieroglyphs: "Here rests the treasure of Urgaan of Angarngi."

The sight of that stone was like a blow in the face to the two adventurers. It roused every ounce of obstinacy and reckless determination in them. What matter that an old man sprawled smashed beside it? They had their swords! What matter they now had proof some grim guardian resided in the treasure house? They could take care of themselves! Run away and leave that stone unmoved, with its insultingly provocative inscription? No, by Kos and the Behemoth! They'd see themselves in Nehwon's hell first!

Fafhrd ran to fetch the pick and the other large tools, which had been dropped on the stairs when Lord Rannarsh tossed his first dagger. The Mouser looked more closely at the jutting stone. The cracks around it were wide and filled with a dark, tarry mixture. It gave out a slightly hollow sound when he tapped it with his sword hilt. He calculated that the wall was about six feet thick at this point—enough to contain a sizable cavity. He tapped experimentally along the wall in both directions, but the hollow ring quickly ceased. Evidently the cavity was a

fairly small one. He noted that the crevices between all the other stones were very fine, showing no evidence of any cementing substance whatsoever. In fact, he couldn't be sure that they weren't false crevices, superficial cuts in the surface of solid rock. But that hardly seemed possible. He heard Fafhrd returning, but continued his examination.

The state of the Mouser's mind was peculiar. A dogged determination to get at the treasure overshadowed other emotions. The inexplicably sudden vanishing of his former terror had left certain parts of his mind benumbed. It was as if he had decided to hold his thoughts in leash until he had seen what the treasure cavity contained. For example, although his examination of the room assured him that the possibility of a secret panel or door was most unlikely, he did not ask himself how the creature or entity that struck down the holy man had entered and escaped. He was content to keep his mind occupied with material details, and yet make no deductions from them.

His calmness gave him a feeling of at least temporary safety. His experiences had vaguely convinced him that the guardian, whatever it was, which had smashed the holy man and played cat and mouse with Rannarsh and themselves, did not strike without first inspiring a premonitory terror in its victims.

Fafhrd felt very much the same way, except that he was even more single-minded in his determination to solve the riddle of the inscribed stone.

They attacked the wide crevices with chisel and mallet. The dark tarry mixture came away fairly easily, first in hard lumps, later in slightly rubbery, gouged strips. After they had cleared it away to the depth of a finger, Fafhrd inserted the pick and managed to move the stone slightly. Thus the Mouser was enabled to gouge a little more deeply on that side. Then Fafhrd subjected the other side of the stone to the leverage of the pick. So the work proceeded, with alternate pryings and gougings.

They concentrated on each detail of the job with unnecessary intensity, mainly to keep their imaginations from being haunted by the image of a man more than two

hundred years dead. A man with high-domed forehead, sunken cheeks, nose of a skull—that is, if the dead thing on the floor was a true type of the breed of Angarngi. A man who had somehow won a great treasure, and then hid it away from all eyes, seeking to obtain neither glory nor material profit from it. Who said he scorned the envy of fools, and who yet wrote many provocative notes in diminutive red lettering in order to inform fools of his treasure and make them envious. Who seemed to be reaching out across the dusty centuries, like a spider spinning a web to catch a fly on the other side of the world.

And yet, he was a skillful architect, the holy man had said. Could such an architect build a stone automaton twice as tall as a tall man? A gray stone automaton with a great club? Could he make a hiding place from which it could emerge, deal death, and then return? No, no, such notions were childish, not to be entertained! Stick to the job in hand. First find what lay behind the inscribed stone. Leave thoughts until afterward.

The stone was beginning to give more easily to the pressure of the pick. Soon they would be able to get a good purchase on it and edge it out.

Meanwhile an entirely new sensation was growing on the Mouser—not one of terror at all, but of physical revulsion. The air he breathed seemed thick and sickening. He found himself disliking the texture and consistency of the tarry mixture, which somehow he could only liken to wholly imaginary substances, such as the dung of dragons or the solidified vomit of the behemoth. He avoided touching it with his fingers, and he kicked away the litter of chunks and strips that had gathered around his feet. The sensation of queasy loathing became difficult to endure.

He tried to fight it, but had no more success than if it had been seasickness, which in some ways it resembled. He felt unpleasantly dizzy. His mouth kept filling with saliva. The cold sweat of nausea beaded his forehead. He could tell that Fafhrd was unaffected, and he hesitated to mention the matter; it seemed ridiculously out of place, especially as it was unaccompanied by any fear or fright.

Finally the stone itself began to have the same effect on him as the tarry mixture, filling him with a seeming causeless, but none the less sickening revulsion. Then he could bear it no longer. With a vaguely apologetic nod to Fafhrd, he dropped his chisel and went to the low window for a breath of fresh air.

This did not seem to help matters much. He pushed his head through the window and gulped deeply. His mental processes were overshadowed by the general indifference of extreme nausea, and everything seemed very far away. Therefore when he saw that the peasant girl was standing in the middle of the clearing, it was some time before he began to consider the import of the fact. When he did, part of his sickness left him; or at least he was enabled to overpower it sufficiently to stare at her with gathering interest.

Her face was white, her fists were clenched, her arms held rigid at her sides. Even at the distance he could catch something of the mingled terror and determination with which her eyes were fixed on the great doorway. Toward this doorway she was forcing herself to move, one jerking step after another, as if she had to keep screwing her courage to a higher pitch. Suddenly the Mouser began to feel frightened, not for himself at all, but for the girl. Her terror was obviously intense, and yet she must be doing what she was doing—braving her "queer and fearsome gray giant"—for his sake and Fafhrd's. At all costs, he thought, she must be prevented from coming closer. It was wrong that she be subjected for one moment longer to such a horribly intense terror.

His mind was confused by his abominable nausea, yet he knew what he must do. He hurried toward the stairs with shaky strides, waving Fafhrd another vague gesture. Just as he was going out of the room he chanced to turn up his eyes, and spied something peculiar on the ceiling. What it was he did not fully realize for some moments.

Fafhrd hardly noticed the Mouser's movements, much less his gestures. The block of stone was rapidly yielding to his efforts. He had previously experienced a faint sug-

gestion of the Mouser's nausea, but perhaps because of his greater single-mindedness, it had not become seriously bothersome. And now his attention was wholly concentrated on the stone. Persistent prying had edged it out a palm's breadth from the wall. Seizing it firmly in his two powerful hands, he tugged it from one side to the other, back and forth. The dark, viscous stuff clung to it tenaciously, but with each sidewise jerk it moved forward a little.

The Mouser lurched hastily down the stairs, fighting vertigo. His feet kicked bones and sent them knocking against the walls. What was it he had seen on the ceiling? Somehow, it seemed to mean something. But he must get the girl out of the clearing. She mustn't come any closer to the house. She mustn't enter.

Fafhrd began to feel the weight of the stone, and knew that it was nearly clear. It was damnably heavy—almost a foot thick. Two carefully gauged heaves finished the job. The stone overbalanced. He stepped back. The stone crashed ponderously on the floor. A rainbow glitter came from the cavity that had been revealed. Fafhrd eagerly thrust his head into it.

The Mouser staggered toward the doorway. It was a bloody smear he had seen against the ceiling. And just above the corpse of the holy man. But why should that be? He'd been smashed against the floor, hadn't he? The girl. He must get to the girl. He must. There she was, almost at the doorway. He could see her. He felt the stone floor vibrating slightly beneath his feet. But that was his dizziness, wasn't it?

Fafhrd felt the vibration, too. But any thought he might have had about it was lost in his wonder at what he saw. The cavity was filled to a level just below the surface of the opening, with a heavy metallic liquid that resembled mercury, except that it was night-black. Resting on this liquid was a more astonishing group of gems than Fafhrd had ever dreamed of.

In the center was a titan diamond, cut with a myriad of oddly angled facets. Around it were two irregular circles,

the inner formed of twelve rubies, each a decahedron, the outer formed of seventeen emeralds, each an irregular octahedron. Lying between these gems, touching some of them, sometimes connecting them with each other, were thin, fragile-looking bars of crystal, amber, greenish tourmaline, and honey-pale orichalchum. All these objects did not seem to be floating in the metallic liquid, so much as resting upon it, their weight pressing down the surface into shallow depressions, some cup-shaped, others trough-like. The rods glowed faintly, while each of the gems glittered with a light that Fafhrd's mind strangely conceived to be refracted starlight.

His gaze shifted to the mercurous heavy fluid, where it bulged up between, and he saw distorted reflections of stars and constellations which he recognized, stars and constellations which would be visible now in the sky overhead, were it not for the concealing brilliance of the sun. An awesome wonder engulfed him. His gaze shifted back to the gems. There was something tremendously meaningful about their complex arrangement, something that seemed to speak of overwhelming truths in an alien symbolism. More, there was a compelling impression of inner movement, or sluggish thought, of inorganic consciousness. It was like what the eyes see when they close at night —not utter blackness, but a shifting, fluid pattern of many-colored points of light. Feeling that he was reaching impiously into the core of a thinking mind, Fafhrd gripped with his right hand for the diamond as big as a man's skull.

The Mouser blundered through the doorway. There could be no mistaking it now. The stones were trembling. That bloody smear, as if the ceiling had champed down upon the holy man, crushing him against the floor, or as if the floor had struck upward. What could it mean? But there was the girl, her terror-wide eyes fastened upon him, her mouth open for a scream that did not come. He must drag her away, out of the clearing.

But why should he feel that a fearful threat was now directed at himself as well? Why should he feel that something was poised above him, threatening? As he stumbled

down the terraced steps, he looked over his shoulder and up. The tower. The tower! It was falling. It was falling toward him. It was dipping at him over the dome. But there were no fractures along its length. It was not breaking. It was not falling. It was bending.

Fafhrd's hand jerked back, clutching the great, strangely faceted jewel, so heavy that he had difficulty in keeping his hold upon it. Immediately the surface of the metallic, star-reflecting fluid was disturbed. It bobbed and shook. Surely the whole house was shaking, too. The other jewels began to dart about erratically, like water insects on the surface of a puddle. The various crystalline and metallic bars began to spin, their tips attracted now to one jewel and now to another, as if they were lodestones. The whole surface of the fluid was in a whirling, jerking confusion that suggested a mind gone mad because of loss of its chief part.

For an agonizing instant the Mouser stared up amazement-frozen at the clublike top of the tower, ponderously hurling itself down upon him. Then he ducked his head and lunged forward at the girl, tackling her, rapidly rolling over and over with her. The tower top struck a sword's length behind them, with a thump that jolted them momentarily off the ground. Then it jerked itself up from the pitlike depression it had made.

Fafhrd tore his gaze away from the incredible, alien beauty of the jewel-confused cavity. His right hand was burning. The diamond was hot. No, it was cold beyond belief. By Kos, the room was changing shape! The ceiling was bulging downward at a point. He made for the door, then stopped dead in his tracks. The door was closing like a stony mouth. He turned and took a few steps over the quaking floor toward the small, low window. It snapped shut, like a sphincter. He tried to drop the diamond. It clung painfully to the inside of his hand. With a snap of his wrist he whipped it away from him. It hit the floor and began to bounce about like a living star.

The Mouser and the peasant girl rolled toward the edge of the clearing. The tower made two more tremendous

bashes at them, but both went yards wide, like the blows of a blind madman. Now they were out of range. The Mouser lay sprawled on his side, watching a house that hunched and heaved like a beast, and a tower that bent double as it thumped grave-deep pits into the ground. It crashed into a group of boulders and its top broke off, but the jaggedly fractured end continued to beat the boulders in wanton anger, smashing them into fragments. The Mouser felt a compulsive urge to take out his dagger and stab himself in the heart. A man had to die when he saw something like that.

Fafhrd clung to sanity because he was threatened from a new direction at every minute and because he could say to himself, "I know. I know. The house is a beast, and the jewels are its mind. Now that mind is mad. I know. I know." Walls, ceiling, and floor quaked and heaved, but their movements did not seem to be directed especially at him. Occasional crashes almost deafened him. He staggered over rocky swells, dodging stony advances that were half bulges and half blows, but that lacked the speed and directness of the tower's first smash at the Mouser. The corpse of the holy man was jolted about in grotesque mechanical reanimation.

Only the great diamond seemed aware of Fafhrd. Exhibiting a fretful intelligence, it kept bounding at him viciously, sometimes leaping as high as his head. He involuntarily made for the door as his only hope. It was champing up and down with convulsive regularity. Watching his chance, he dived at it just as it was opening, and writhed through. The diamond followed him, striking at his legs. The carcass of Rannarsh was flung sprawling in his path. He jumped over it, then slid, lurched, stumbled, fell down stairs in earthquake, where dry bones danced. Surely the beast must die, the house must crash and crush him flat. The diamond leaped for his skull, missed, hurtled through the air, and struck a wall. Thereupon it burst like an explosive into a great puff of irridescent dust.

Immediately the rhythm of the shaking of the house began to increase. Fafhrd raced across the vibrating floor,

escaped by inches the embrace of the great doorway, plunged across the clearing—passing a dozen feet from the spot where the tower was beating boulders into crushed rock—and then leaped over two pits in the ground. His face was rigid and white. His eyes were vacant. He blundered bull-like into two or three trees, and only came to a halt because he knocked himself flat against one of them.

The house had ceased most of its random movements, and the whole of it was shaking like a huge dark jelly. Suddenly its forward part heaved up like a behemoth in death agony. The two smaller domes were jerked ponderously a dozen feet off the ground, as if they were the paws. The tower whipped into convulsive rigidity. The main dome contracted sharply, like a stupendous lung. For a moment it hung there, poised. Then it crashed to the ground in a heap of gigantic stone shards. The earth shook. The forest resounded. Escaping air whipped branches and leaves. Then all was still. Only from the fractures in the stone a tarry, black liquid was slowing oozing, and here and there irridescent puffs of air suggested jewel-dust.

Along a narrow, dusty road two horsemen were cantering slowly toward the village of Soreev in the southernmost limits of the land of Lankhmar. They presented a somewhat battered appearance. The limbs of the larger, who was mounted on a chestnut gelding, showed several bruises, and there was a bandage around his thigh and another around the palm of his right hand. The smaller man, the one mounted on a gray mare, seemed to have suffered an equal number of injuries.

"Do you know where we're headed?" said the latter, breaking a long silence. "We're headed for a city. And in that city are endless houses of stone, stone towers without numbers, streets paved with stone, domes, arches, stairs. *Tcha,* if I feel then as I feel now, I'll never go within a bowshot of its walls."

His large companion smiled.

"What now, little man? Don't tell me you're afraid of —earthquakes?"

Lankhmar is always the lodestone of Fafhrd's and the Mouser's wanderings; again and again they are drawn back to it. Most civilized and most corrupt of Nehwon's cities, Lankhmar has made subtlety a way of life and treachery a tradition, from the intrigues of its black-togaed overlords and the scandalmongering of its skalds to the swindles of its merchants and the double-dealings of its Thieves' Guild, most hidebound of Lankhmarian organizations.

thieves' house

"WHAT'S the use of knowing the name of a skull? One would never have occasion to talk to it," said the fat thief loudly. "What interests me is that it has rubies for eyes."

"Yet it is written here that its name is Ohmphal," replied the black-bearded thief in the quieter tones of authority.

"Let me see," said the red-haired wench, leaning over his shoulder. Together the three of them read the tiny hieroglyphs.

ITEM: the skull Ohmphal, of the Master Thief Ohmphal, with great ruby eyes; and one pair of jeweled hands. HISTORY OF ITEM: the skull Ohmphal was stolen from the Thieves' Guild by the priests of Votishal and placed by them in the crypt of their accursed temple. INSTRUCTIONS: the skull Ohmphal is to be recovered at the earliest opportunity, that it may be given proper veneration in the Thieves' Sepulcher. DIFFICULTIES: the lock of the door leading to the crypt is reputed to be beyond the cunning of any thief to pick. WARNINGS: within the crypt is rumored to be a guardian beast of terrible ferocity.

"Those crabbed letters are devilish hard to read," said the red-haired wench, frowning.

"And no wonder, for they were written centuries ago," said the black-bearded thief.

"Where did you find this parchment?" she asked.

"Beneath the false bottom of a moldering chest in our storerooms," he replied.

"By the gods who are not," chuckled the fat thief, still pouring over the parchment, "the Thieves' Guild must have been superstitious in those ancient days. To think of wasting jewels on a mere skull. If we ever get hold of Master Ohmphal, we'll venerate him—by changing his ruby eyes into good hard money."

"Aye!" said the black-bearded thief, "And it was just that matter I wanted to talk to you about, Fissif—the getting hold of Ohmphal."

"Oh, but there are—difficulties, as you, Krovas our master, must surely know," said the fat thief, quickly singing another tune. "Even today, after the passage of centuries, men still shudder when they speak of the crypt of Votishal, with its lock and its beast. There is no one in the Thieves' Guild who can—–"

"No one in the Thieves' Guild, that's true!" interrupted the black-bearded thief sharply. "But—–" and here his voice began to go low—"there are those outside the Thieves' Guild who can. Have you heard that there is recently returned here to Lankhmar a certain rogue and picklock known as the Gray Mouser? And with him a huge barbarian who goes by the name of Fafhrd, but is sometimes called the Beast-Slayer? That pair commonly hunts alone —yet if you were to approach them with this tempting suggestion—–"

"But Master," interposed the fat thief, "in that case, they would demand at least two thirds of the profits."

"Exactly!" said the black-bearded thief, with a sudden flash of cold humor. The red-haired wench caught his meaning, and laughed aloud. "Exactly! And that is just the reason why I have chosen you, Fissif, the smoothest of double-crossers, to undertake this business."

The ten remaining days of the Month of the Serpent

had passed, and the first fifteen days of the Month of the Owl, since those three had conferred. And the fifteenth day had darkened into night. Chill fog, like a shroud, hugged ancient stony Lankhmar, chief city of the land of Lankhmar. This night the fog had come earlier than usual, flowing down the twisting streets and mazy alleyways. And it was getting thicker.

In one street rather narrower and more silent than the rest, a square of yellow torchlight shone from a wide doorway in a vast and rambling house of stone. There was something ominous in a single open door in a street where all other doors were barred against the darkness and the damp. People avoided this street at night. And there was reason for their fear. The house had a bad reputation. People said it was the den in which the thieves of Lankhmar gathered to plot and palaver and settle their private bickerings, the headquarters from which Krovas, the reputed Master Thief, issued his orders—in short, the meeting place of the formidable Thieves' Guild of Lankhmar.

But now a man came hurrying along this street, every now and then looking apprehensively over his shoulder. He was a fat man, and he hobbled a little, as if he had recently ridden hard and far. He carried a tarnished and ancient-looking copper box of about the size to contain a human head. He paused in the doorway and uttered a certain password—seemingly to the empty air, for the long hall ahead of him was empty. But a voice from a point inside and above the doorway answered, "Pass, Fissif. Krovas awaits you in his room." And the fat one said, "They follow me close—you know the two I mean." And the voice replied, "We are ready for them." And the fat one hurried down the hall.

For a considerable time, then, there was nothing but silence and the thickening fog. Finally a faint warning whistle came from somewhere down the street. It was repeated closer by and answered from inside the doorway.

Then, from the same direction as the first whistle, came the tread of feet, growing louder. It sounded as if there

were only one person, but the effulgence of the light from the door showed that there was also a little man, who walked softly, a little man clad in close-fitting garments of gray—tunic, jerkin, mouseskin cap and cloak.

His companion was rangy and copper-haired, obviously a northern barbarian from the distant lands of the Cold Waste. His tunic was rich brown, his cloak green. There was considerable leather about him—wristbands, headband, boots, and a wide tight-laced belt. Fog had wet the leather and misted the brass studding it. As they entered the square of light before the doorway, a frown furrowed his broad wide forehead. His green eyes glanced quickly from side to side. Putting his hand on the little man's shoulder, he whispered:

"I don't like the looks of this, Gray Mouser."

"*Tcha!* The place always looks like this," retorted the Gray Mouser sharply, his mobile lips sneering and dark eyes blazing. "They just do it to scare the populace. Come on, Fafhrd! We're not going to let that misbegotten, double-dealing Fissif escape after the way he cheated us."

"I know all that, my angry little weasel," the barbarian replied, tugging the Mouser back. "And the idea of Fissif escaping displeases me. But putting my bare neck in a trap displeases me more. Remember, they whistled."

"*Tcha!* They always whistle. They like to be mysterious. I know these thieves, Fafhrd. I've known them all my life. Come on."

The big man shrugged his shoulders and started forward.

"On second thought," whispered the Mouser, "there may be something to what you say." And he slipped a dirk from his belt.

Fafhrd showed white teeth in a grin and slowly pulled a big-pommeled longsword from its well-oiled scabbard.

"A rotten weapon for infighting," murmured the Mouser in a comradely sardonical way.

Warily now they approached the door, each taking a side and sticking close to the wall. Holding the grip of his sword low, the point high, ready to strike in any direction, Fafhrd entered. The Mouser was a little ahead of him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw something snakelike dropping down at the Mouser's head from above, and struck at it quickly with his sword. This flipped it toward him and he caught it with his free hand. It was a strangler's noose. He gave it a sudden sidewise heave and the man gripping the other end toppled out from a ledge above. For an instant he seemed to hang suspended in the air, a dark-skinned rogue with long black hair and a greasy tunic of red leather worked with gold thread. As Fafhrd deliberately raised his sword, he saw that the Mouser was lunging across the corridor at him, dirk in hand. For a moment he thought the Mouser had gone mad. But the Mouser's dirk missed him by a hairbreadth and another blade whipped by him from behind.

The Mouser had seen a trapdoor open in the floor beside Fafhrd and a bald-headed thief shoot up, sword in hand. After deflecting the blow aimed at his companion, the Mouser slammed the trapdoor back and had the satisfaction of catching with it the blade of the sword and two lefthand fingers of the ducking thief. All three were broken and the muted yowl from below was impressive. Fafhrd's man, spitted on the longsword, was quite dead.

From the street came several whistles and the sound of men moving in.

"They've cut us off!" snapped the Mouser. "Our best chance lies ahead. We'll make for Krovas' room. Fissif may be there. Follow me!"

And he darted down the corridor and up a winding stair, Fafhrd behind him. At the fourth level they left the stair, made right and left turns at spots where dimly-lit corridors intersected, then raced for a doorway from which yellow light shone.

It puzzled the Mouser that they had met with no interference. His sharp ears no longer caught sounds of pursuit. On the threshold he pulled up quickly, so that Fafhrd collided with him.

It was a large room with several alcoves. Like the rest of the building, the floor and walls were of smooth dark stone, unembellished. It was lit by four earthenware lamps

set at random on a heavy cyprus table. Behind the table sat a richly robed, black-bearded man, seemingly staring down in extreme astonishment at a copper box and a litter of smaller objects, his hands gripping the table edge. But they had no time to consider his odd motionlessness and still odder complexion, for their attention was immediately riveted on the red-haired wench who stood beside him.

As she sprang back like a startled cat, Fafhrd pointed at what she held under one arm and cried, "Look Mouser, the skull! The skull and the hands!"

Clasped in her slim arm was indeed a brownish, ancient-looking skull, curiously banded with gold, from whose eye sockets great rubies sparkled and whose teeth were diamonds and blackened pearls. And in her white hand were gripped two neat packets of brown bones, tipped with a golden gleam and reddish sparkle. Even as Fafhrd spoke she turned and ran toward the largest alcove, her lithe legs outlined against silken garments. Fafhrd and the Mouser rushed after her. They saw she was heading for a small low doorway. Entering the alcove her free hand shot out and gripped a cord hanging from the ceiling. Not pausing, swinging at the hips, she gave it a tug. Folds of thick, weighted velvet fell down behind her. The Mouser and Fafhrd plunged into them and floundered. It was the Mouser who got through first, wriggling under. He saw an oblong of faint light narrowing ahead of him, sprang for it, grabbed at the block of stone sinking into the low doorway, then jerked his hand back with a curse and sucked at bruised fingers. The stone panel closed with a slight grating noise.

Fafhrd lifted the thick folds of velvet on his broad shoulders as if they were a great cloak. Light from the main room flooded into the alcove and revealed a closely mortised stone wall of uniform appearance. The Mouser started to dig the point of his dirk into a crack, then desisted.

"Pah! I know these doors! They're either worked from the other side or else by distant levers. She's gotten clear away and the skull with her."

He continued to suck the fingers that had come so near

to being crushed, wondering superstitiously if his breaking of the thief's fingers had been a kind of omen.

"We forget Krovas," said Fafhrd suddenly, lifting the drapes with his hand and looking back over his shoulder.

But the black-bearded man had not taken any notice of the commotion. As they approached him slowly they saw that his face was bluish-purple under the swarthy skin, and that his eyes bulged not from astonishment, but from strangulation. Fafhrd lifted the oily, well-combed beard and saw cruel indentations on the throat, seeming more like those of claws than fingers. The Mouser examined the things on the table. There were a number of jeweler's instruments, their ivory handles stained deep yellow from long use. He scooped up some small objects.

"Krovas had already pried three of the finger-jewels loose and several of the teeth," he remarked, showing Fafhrd three rubies and a number of pearls and diamonds, which glittered on his palm.

Fafhrd nodded and again lifted Krovas' beard, frowning at the indentations, which were beginning to deepen in color.

"I wonder who the woman is?" said the Mouser. "No thief is permitted to bring a woman here on pain of death. But the Master Thief has special powers and perhaps can take chances."

"He has taken one too many," muttered Fafhrd.

Then the Mouser awoke to their situation. He had half-formulated a plan of effecting an escape from the Thieves' House by capturing and threatening Krovas. But a dead man cannot be effectively intimidated. As he started to speak to Fafhrd they caught the murmur of several voices and the sound of approaching footsteps. Without deliberation they retired into the alcove, the Mouser cutting a small slit in the drapes at eye level and Fafhrd doing the same.

They heard someone say, "Yes, the two of them got clean away, damn their luck! We found the alley door open."

The first thief to enter was paunchy, whitefaced, and obviously frightened. The Gray Mouser and Fafhrd im-

mediately recognized him as Fissif. Pushing him along roughly was a tall, expressionless fellow with heavy arms and big hands. The Mouser knew him, too—Slevyas the Tight-lipped, Krovas' chief lieutenant. About a dozen others filed into the room and took up positions near the walls. Veteran thieves all, with a considerable sprinkling of scars, pockmarks, and other mutilations, including two black-patched eye sockets. They were somewhat wary and ill at ease, held daggers and shortswords ready, and all stared intently at the strangled man.

"So Krovas is truly dead," said Slevyas, shoving Fissif forward. "At least that much of your story is true."

"Dead as a fish," echoed a thief who had moved closer to the table. "Now we've got us a better master. We'll have no more of black-beard and his red-haired wench."

"Hide your teeth, rat, before I break them!" Slevyas whipped out the words coldly.

"But you are our master now," replied the thief in a surprised voice.

"Yes, I'm the master of all of you, unquestioned master, and my first piece of advice is this: to criticize a dead thief may not be irreverent—but it is certainly a waste of time. Now, Fissif, where's the jeweled skull? We all know it's more valuable than a year's pickpocketing, and that the Thieves' Guild needs gold. So, no nonsense!"

The Mouser peering cautiously from his slit, grinned at the look of fear on Fissif's fat-jowled face.

"The skull, master?" said Fissif in a quavering sepulchral tone. "Why it's flown back to the grave from which we three filched it. Surely if those bony hands could strangle Krovas, as I saw with my own eyes, the skull could fly."

Slevyas slapped Fissif across the face.

"You lie, you quaking bag of mush! I will tell you what happened. You plotted with those two rogues, the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd. You thought no one would suspect you because you double-crossed them according to instructions. But you planned a double-double-cross. You helped them escape the trap we had set, let them kill Krovas, and then assured their escape by starting a panic with your

tale of dead fingers killing Krovas. You thought you could brazen it out."

"But master," Fissif pleaded, "with my own eyes I saw the skeletal fingers leap to his throat. They were angry with him because he had pried forth some of the jewels that were their nails and——"

Another slap changed his statement to a whining grunt.

"A fool's story," sneered a scrawny thief. "How could the bones hold together?"

"They were laced on brass wires," returned Fissif in meek tones.

"Nah! And I suppose the hands,, after strangling Krovas, picked up the skull and carried it away with them?" suggested another thief. Several sniggered. Slevyas silenced them with a look, then indicated Fissif with his thumb.

"Pinion him," he ordered.

Two thieves sidled up to Fissif, who offered no resistance. They twisted his arms behind his back.

"We'll do this thing decently," said Slevyas, seating himself on the table. "Thieves' Trial. Everything in order. Briefly this is a matter for the Thieves' Jury to consider. Fissif, cut-purse of the first rank, was commissioned to loot the sacred grave at the temple of Votishal of one skull and one pair of hands. Because of certain unusual difficulties involved, Fissif was ordered to league himself with two outsiders of special talent, to wit, the northern barbarian Fafhrd and the notorious Gray Mouser."

The Mouser made a courteous and formal bow behind the drapes, then glued his eye once more to the slit.

"The loot obtained, Fissif was to steal it from the two others—and at the earliest possible moment, to avoid their stealing it from him."

The Mouser thought he heard Fafhrd smother a curse and grit his teeth.

"If possible, Fissif was to slay them," concluded Slevyas. "In any case he was to bring the loot direct to Kovas. So much for Fissif's instructions, as detailed to me by Krovas. Now tell your story, Fissif, but—mind you—no old-wives' tales."

"Brother thieves," began Fissif in a heavy mournful voice. This was greeted by several derisive cries. Slevyas rapped carelessly for order.

"I followed out those instructions just as they were given me," continued Fissif. "I sought out Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and interested them in the plan. I agreed to share the loot equally with them, a third to each man."

Fafhrd, squinting at Fissif through the drape, nodded his head solemnly. Fissif then made several uncomplimentary remarks about Fafhrd and the Mouser, evidently hoping thereby to convince his listeners that he had not plotted with them. The other thieves only smiled grimly.

"And when it came to the actual filching of the loot from the temple," Fissif went on, gaining confidence from the sound of his own voice, "it turned out I had little need of their help."

Again Fafhrd smothered a curse. He could hardly endure listening in silence to such outrageous lies. But the Mouser enjoyed it after a fashion.

"This is an unwise time to brag," interjected Slevyas. "You know very well that the Mouser's cunning was needed in picking the great triple lock, and that the guardian beast could not easily have been slain but for the Northerner."

Fafhrd was somewhat mollified by this. Fissif became humble again and bowed his head in assent. The thieves began gradually to close in on him.

"And so," he finished in a kind of panic, "I took up the loot while they slept, and spurred on to Lankhmar. I dared not slay them, for fear the killing of one would awaken the other. I brought the loot direct to Krovas, who complimented me and began to pry out the gems. There lies the copper box which held the skull and hands." He pointed at the table. "And as for what happened afterwards,"—he paused, wet his lips, looked around fearfully, then added in a small despairing voice—"it happened just as I told you before."

The thieves, snarling disbelief, closed in, but Slevyas halted them with a peremptory rap. He seemed to be considering something.

Another thief darted into the doom, saluted Slevyas. "Master," he panted, "Moolsh, stationed on the roof opposite the alley door, has just reported that, though open all night, no one either entered or left. The two intruders may still be here!"

Slevyas' start as he received the news was almost imperceptible. He stared at his informant. Then slowly and as if drawn by instinct, his impassive face turned until his pale, small eyes rested upon the heavy drapes curtaining the alcove. As he was about to give an order, the drapes bellied out as if with a great gust of wind. They swung forward and up until almost level with the ceiling, and he glimpsed two figures racing forward. The tall, copper-haired barbarian was aiming a blow at him.

With a suppleness which belied his large frame, Slevyas half-ducked, half-dropped, and the great longsword bit deep into the table against which he had been resting. From the floor he saw his underlings springing back in confusion, one staggered by a blow. Fissif, quicker-nerved than the rest because he knew his life was at stake in more ways than one, snatched and hurled a dagger. It was an imperfect throw, traveling pommel-forward. But it was accurate. Slevyas saw it take the tall barbarian on the side of the head as he rushed through the doorway, seeming to stagger him. Then Slevyas was on his feet, sword drawn and organizing pursuit. In a few moments the room was empty, save for dead Krovas staring at an empty copper box in a cruel mockery of astonishment.

The Gray Mouser knew the layout of the Thieves' House—not as well as the palm of his hand, but well enough—and he led Fafhrd along a bewildering route. They careened around stoney angles, sprang up and down small sets of steps, two or three each, which made it difficult to determine which level they were on. The Mouser had drawn his slim sword Scalpel for the first time and used it to knock over the candles they passed, and to make swipes at the wall torches, hoping thereby to confuse the pursuit, whose whistles sounded sharply from behind them. Twice Fafhrd stumbled and recovered himself.

Two half-dressed apprentice thieves stuck their heads out of a door. The Mouser slammed it in their inquiring, excited faces, then sprang down a curving stairway. He was heading for a third exit he surmised would be poorly guarded.

"If we are separated, let our rendezvous be the Silver Eel," he said in a quick aside to Fafhrd, mentioning a tavern they frequented.

The northerner nodded. His head was beginning to feel less dizzy now, though it still pained him considerably. He did not, however, gauge accurately the height of the low arch under which the Mouser sped after descending the equivalent of two levels, and it gave his head as hard a clip as had the dagger. Everything went dark and whirling before his eyes. He heard the Mouser saying, "This way now! We follow the left-hand wall," and trying to keep a tight hold on his consciousness, he plunged into the narrow corridor down which the Mouser was pointing. He thought the Mouser was following him.

But the Mouser had waited a moment too long. True, the main pursuit was still out of sight, but a watchman whose duty it was to patrol this passage, hearing the whistles, had returned hurriedly from a friendly game of dice. The Mouser ducked as the artfully-cast noose settled around his neck, but not quite soon enough. It tightened cruelly against ear, cheek, and jawbone, and brought him down. In the next instant Scalpel severed the cord, but that gave the watchman time to get out his sword. For a few perilous moments the Mouser fought him from the floor, warding off a flashing point that came close enough to his nose to make him cross-eyed. Watching his chance, he scrambled to his feet, rushed his man back a dozen paces with a whirlwind attack in which Scalpel seemed to become three or four swords, and ended the man's cries for help with a slicing thrust through the neck.

The delay was sufficient. As the Mouser wrenched away the noose from his cheek and mouth, where it had gagged him during the fight, he saw the first of Slevyas' crowd dart out under the archway. Abruptly the Mouser made

off down the main corridor, away from the path of escape Fafhrd had taken. A half dozen plans flashed through his mind. There came a triumphant outcry as Slevyas' crowd sighted him, then a number of whistles from ahead. He decided his best chance was to make for the roof, and whirled into a cross corridor. He was hopeful that Fafhrd had escaped, though the northerner's behavior bothered him. He was supremely confident that he, the Gray Mouser, could elude ten times as many thieves as now careened and skidded through the mazy corridors of the Thieves' House. He lengthened his skipping stride, and his soft-shod feet fairly flew over the well-worn stone.

Fafhrd, lost in pitch darkness for he didn't know how long, steadied himself against what felt like a table and tried to remember how he had gotten so grievously far astray. But his skull throbbed and kept tightening with pain, and the incidents he recalled were jumbled up, with gaps in between. There was a matter of sprawling down a stair and of pushing against a wall of carven stone which had given way silently and let him tumble through. At one point he had been violently sick and at another he must have been unconscious for some time, for he recalled pushing himself up from a prone position and crawling for some distance on hands and knees through a jumble of casks and bales of rotten cloth. That he had banged his head at least once more he was certain; pushing his fingers through his tangled, sweaty locks he could detect as many as three distinct lumps in his scalp. His chief emotion was a dull and persistent anger directed at the heavy masses of stone around him. His primitive imagination half-invested them with a conscious intent to oppose him and block him off whichever way he moved. He knew that he had somehow confused the Mouser's simple directions. Just which wall was it the little gray man had told him to follow? And just where was the Mouser? In some fearful mix-up likely.

If only the air weren't so hot and dry, he felt he'd be able to think things out better. Nothing seemed to agree. Even the quality of the air didn't fit with his impression

that he had been descending most of the way, as if into a deep cellar. It should have been cold and damp, but it wasn't. He slid his hand along the wooden surface on which it was resting, and soft dust piled up between his fingers. That, along with the impenetrable darkness and total silence, would seem to indicate he was in a region of the Thieves' House long disused. He brooded for a moment over his memories of the stone crypt from which he and the Mouser and Fissif had filched the jeweled skull. The fine dust, rising to his nostrils, made him sneeze, and that started him moving again. His groping hand found a wall. He tried to recall the direction from which he had originally approached the table, but was unable to, and so started out at random. He moved along slowly, feeling his way, hand and foot.

His caution saved him. One of the stones seemed to give slightly under his exploring foot and he stopped dead. Abruptly there came a rasping sound followed by a clank and two muffled thuds. The air in front of his face was disturbed. He waited a moment, then groped forward cautiously through the blackness. His hand encountered a strip of rusty metal at shoulder level. Feeling along it gingerly he found it protruded from a crevice in the left wall, and ended in a point a few inches from a wall he now discovered to be on his right. Further groping revealed a similar blade below the first. He now realized that the thudding sounds had been caused by counterweights, which, released by pressure on the stone, had automatically propelled the blades through the crevice. Another step forward and he would have been spitted. He reached for his longsword, found it was not in the scabbard, so took the scabbard instead and with it broke off the two blades close to the wall. Then he turned and retraced his steps to the dust-covered table.

But a slow tracing of the wall beyond the table led him back to the corridor of the sword blades. He shook his aching head and cursed angrily because he had no light nor way of making fire. How then? Had he originally entered this blind alley by way of the corridor, missing the

deadly stone by pure luck? That seemed to be the only answer, so with a growl he started off again down the corridor of the sword blades, arms outstretched and hands brushing the two walls, so that he might know when he came to an intersection. After a little it occurred to him that he might have fallen into the chamber behind from some entrance part way up the wall, but stubbornness kept him from turning back a second time.

The next thing his exploring foot encountered was an emptiness, which turned out to be the beginning of a flight of stone steps leading down. At that point he gave up trying to remember just how he had gotten where he was. About twenty steps down his nostrils caught a musty, arid odor welling up from below. Another twenty steps and he began comparing it to the odor found in certain ancient desert sepulchers of the Eastern Lands. There was an almost imperceptible spiciness to it, a dead spiciness. His skin felt hot and dry. He drew his long knife from his belt and moved silently, slowly.

At the fifty-third step the stair ended and the side walls retreated. From the feel of the air, he thought he must be in a large chamber. He advanced a little way, his boots scuffing a thick carpet of fine dust. There was a dry flapping and faint rattling in the air above his head. Twice something small and hard brushed his cheek. He remembered bat-infested caves into which he had previously ventured. But these tiny noises, though in many ways similar, were not quite like those of bats. The short hairs prickled on the back of his neck. He strained his eyes, but saw only the meaningless pattern of points of light that comes with inky darkness.

Again one of the things brushed his face and this time he was ready for it. His big hands grabbed swiftly—and then nearly dropped what they clutched, for it was dry and weightless, a mere framework of tiny brittle bones which cracked under his fingers. His finger and thumb encountered a minute animal skull.

His mind fought down the idea of bats which were skeletons and yet flapped to and fro in a great tomblike

chamber. Surely this creature must have died hanging to the roof above his head, and his entrance dislodged it. But he did not grasp again at the faint rattling noises in the air.

Then he began to sense sounds of another sort—diminutive shrill squeaks almost too high for the ear to catch. Whatever they were, real or imagined, there was that about them which bred panic, and Fafhrd found himself shouting: "Speak to me! What are you whining and tittering about? Reveal yourselves!"

At this, echoes cried faintly back to him, and he knew for certain he was in a large chamber. Then there was silence, even the sounds in the air receding. And after the silence had endured for twenty or more beats of Fafhrd's pounding heart, it was broken in a way Fafhrd did not like.

A faint, high, listless voice came from somewhere ahead of him, saying, "The man is a northerner, brothers, a long-haired, uncouth barbarian from the Cold Waste."

From a spot a little ways to one side a similar voice responded, "In our days we met many of his breed at the docks. We soused them with drink, and stole gold dust from their pouches. We were mighty thieves in our day, matchless in craft and cunning."

And a third—"See, he has lost his sword, and look, brothers, he has crushed a bat and holds it in his hand."

Fafhrd's shout to the effect that this was all nonsense and mummery died before it reached his lips, for it suddenly occurred to him to wonder how these creatures could tell his appearance and even see what he held in his hand, when it was pitch dark. Fafhrd knew well that even the cat and the owl are blind in complete darkness. A crawling terror took hold of him.

"But the skull of a bat is not the skull of a man," came what seemed to be the first voice. "He is one of the three who recovered our brother's skull from the temple of Votishal. Yet he has not brought the skull with him."

"For centuries our brother's bejeweled head has languished lonely under the accursed fane of Votishal," spoke a fourth. "And now that those above have stolen him back,

they do not mean to return him to us. They would tear out his glittering eyes and sell them for greasy coins. They are puny thieves, godless and greedy. They have forgotten us, their ancient brothers, and are evil entirely."

There was something horribly dead and faraway about the voices, as if they formed in a void. Something emotionless and yet strangely sad and strangely menacing, halfway between a faint, hopeless sigh and a fainter, icy laugh. Fafhrd clenched his hands tight, so that the tiny skeleton crackled to splinters, which he brushed away spasmodically. He tried to rally his courage and move forward, but could not.

"It is not fitting that such ignoble fate befall our brother," came the first voice, which held the barest suggestion of authority over the others. "Hearken now, northerner, to our words, and hearken well."

"See, brothers," broke in the second, "the northerner is afraid, and wipes his mouth with his great hand, and gnaws his knuckle in uncertainty and fear."

Fafhrd began to tremble at hearing his actions so minutely described. Long-buried terrors arose in his mind. He remembered his earliest thoughts of death, how as a boy he had first witnessed the terrible funeral rites of the Cold Waste and joined in muted prayers to Kos and the nameless god of doom. Then, for the first time, he thought he could distinguish something in the darkness. It might only have been a peculiar formation of the meaningless pattern of light, but he seemed to distinguish a number of sparkling points on a level with his own head, all in pairs about a thumb's-length apart. Some seemed deep red, and some green, and some pale-blue like sapphires. He vividly recalled the ruby eyes of the skull stolen from Votishal, the skull Fissif averred had strangled Krovas with bony hands. The points of light seemed to be gathering together and moving toward him, very slowly.

"Northerner," continued the first voice, "know that we are the ancient master thieves of Lankhmar, and that we needs must have the lost skull of our brother Ohmphal.

You must bring it to us before the stars of midnight next shine overhead. Else you will be sought out and your life drawn from you."

The pairs of colored lights were still closing in, and now Fafhrd thought he could hear the sound of dry, grating footsteps in the dust. He recalled the deep, purple indentations on the throat of Krovas.

"You must bring the skull without fail," echoed the second voice.

"Before next midnight," came another.

"The jewels must be in the skull; not one must be held back from us."

"Ohmphal our brother shall return."

"If you fail us," whispered the first voice, "we shall come for you."

And then they seemed to be all around him, crying out "Ohmphal–Ohmphal," in those detestable voices which were still not one whit louder or less faraway. Fafhrd thrust out his hands convulsively, touched something hard and smooth and dry. And with that he shook and started like a frightened horse, turned and ran off at full speed, came to a painful, stumbling stop against the stone steps, and raced up them three at a time, stumbling, and bruising his elbows against the walls.

The fat thief Fissif wandered about disconsolately in a large low cellar-chamber, dimly lighted, littered with odds and ends and piled with empty casks and bales of rotten cloth. He chewed a mildly soporific nut which stained his lips blue and dribbled down his flabby jaws; at regular intervals he sighed in self-pity. He realized his prospects in the Thieves' Guild were rather dubious, even though Slevyas had granted him a kind of reprieve. He recalled the fishy look in Slevyas' eye and shivered. He did not like the loneliness of the cellar-chamber, but anything was preferable to the contemptuous, threatening glances of his brother thieves.

The sound of dragging footsteps caused him to swallow one of his monotonous sighs—his chew along with it—and duck behind a table. There appeared from the shadows

a startling apparition. Fissif recognized it as the northerner, Fafhrd, but it was a very sorry-looking Fafhrd, face pale and grimy, clothes and hair bedraggled and smeared with a grayish dust. He moved like a man bewildered or deep in thought. Fissif, realizing that here indeed was a golden opportunity, picked up a sizable tapestry-weight that was lying at hand, and stole softly after the brooding figure.

Fafhrd had just about convinced himself that the strange voices from which he had fled were only the figments of his brain, fostered by fever and headache. After all, he reasoned, a blow on the head often made a person see colored lights and hear high ringing noises; he must have been almost witless to get lost in the dark so readily—the ease with which he'd retraced his path this time proved that. The thing to do now was to concentrate on escaping from this musty den. He mustn't dream. There was a houseful of thieves on the lookout for him, and he might expect to meet one at any turn.

As he shook his head to clear it, and gazed up alertly, there descended on his thick skull the sixth blow it had received that night. But this one was harder.

Slevyas' reaction to the news of Fafhrd's capture was not exactly what Fissif had expected. He did not smile. He did not look up from the platter of cold meats set before him. He merely took a small swallow of pale-yellow wine and went on eating.

"The jeweled skull?" he questioned curtly, between mouthfuls.

Fissif explained that it was possible the northerner had hidden or lost it somewhere in the lower reaches of the cellars. A careful search would answer the question. "Perhaps the Gray Mouser was carrying it——"

"You killed the northerner?" asked Sleyvas after a pause.

"Not quite," answered Fissif proudly. "But I joggled his brains for him."

Fissif expected a compliment at this, or at least a friendly nod, but received instead a cold, appraising stare, the import of which was difficult to determine. Slevyas thoroughly masticated a mouthful of meat, swallowed it, then

took a deliberate swallow of wine. All the while his eyes did not leave Fissif.

Finally he said, "Had you killed him, you would at this instant be put to torture. Understand, fat-belly, that I do not trust you. Too many things point to your complicity. If you had plotted with him, you would have killed him to prevent your treason being revealed. Perhaps you did not try to kill him. Fortunate for you his skull is thick."

The matter-of-fact tone stifled Fissif's protest. Slevyas drained the last of his cup, leaned back, and signed for the apprentices to take the dishes away.

"Has the northerner regained his senses?" he asked abruptly.

Fissif nodded, and added, "He seemed to be in a fever. Struggled against his bonds and muttered words. Something about 'next midnight'. He repeated that three times. The rest was in an outlandish tongue."

A scrawny, rat-eared thief entered. "Master," he said bowling obsequiously, "we have found the Gray Mouser. He sits at the Silver Eel Tavern. Several of ours watch the place. Shall he be captured or slain?"

"Had he the skull with him? Or a box that might hide it?"

"No, master," responded the thief lugubriously, bowling even lower than before.

Sleyvas sat for a moment in thought, then motioned an apprentice to bring parchment and the black ink of the squid. He wrote a few lines, then threw a question to Fissif.

"What were the words the northerner muttered?"

"'Next midnight,' master," answered Fissif, becoming obsequious himself.

"They will fit nicely," said Slevyas, smiling thinly as if at an irony only he could perceive. His pen moved on over the stiff parchment.

The Gray Mouser sat with his back to the wall behind a tankard-dented, wine-stained table at the Silver Eel, nervously rolling between finger and thumb one of the rubies he had taken from under the eyes of dead Krovas. His small cup of wine spiced with bitter herbs was still half full. His glance flitted restlessly around the almost empty

room and back and forth between the four small window spaces, high in the wall, that let in the chill fog. He gazed narrowly at the fat, leather-aproned innkeeper who snored dismally on a stool beside the short stair leading up to the door. He listened with half an ear to the disjointed, somnolent mumbling of the two soldiers across the room, who clutched large tankards and, heads leaned together in drunken confidentialness, tried to tell each other of ancient strategems and mighty marches.

Why didn't Fafhrd come? This was no time for the huge fellow to be late, yet since the Mouser's arrival at the Silver Eel, the candles had melted down half an inch. The Mouser no longer found pleasure in recalling the perilous stages of his escape from the Thieves' House—the dash up the stairs, the leaping from roof to roof, the short fight among the chimneys. By the Gods of Trouble! Would he have to go back to that den, now filled with ready knives and open eyes, to begin search for his companion? He snapped his fingers so that the jewel between them shot high toward the sooty ceiling, a little track of sparkling red which his other hand snatched back as it descended, like a lizard trapping a fly. Again he stared suspiciously at the slumped, open-mouthed innkeeper.

From the corner of his eye he saw the small steel messenger streaking down toward him from a fog-dim rectangle of window. Instinctively he jerked to one side. But there was no need. The dagger buried its point in the table top an arm's length to one side. For what seemed a long time the Mouser stood ready to jump again. The hollow, smacking noise of the impact had not awakened the innkeeper nor disturbed the soldiers, one of whom now snored, too. Then the Mouser's left hand reached out and rocked the dagger loose. He slipped the small roll of parchment from the blade, and, still keeping his gaze near the windows, read in snatches the harshly-drawn runes of Lankhmar.

Their import was this. "If you do not bring the jeweled skull to what was Krovas' and is now Slevyas' chamber by next midnight, we will begin to kill the northerner."

Again next night the fog crept early into Lankhmar. Sounds were muffled and torches ringed with smoky halos. But it was not yet late, although midnight was nearing, and the streets were filled with hurrying shopkeepers and craftsmen, and drinkers happily laughing from their first cups, and sailors new on leave ogling the shopgirls.

In the street next that on which stood the Thieves' House —the Street of the Silk Merchants, it was called—the crowd was thinning. The merchants were shutting shop. Occasionally they exchanged the noisy greetings of business rivals and plied shrewd questions pertaining to the state of trade. Several of them looked curiously at a narrow stone building, overshadowed by the dark mass of the Thieves' House, and from whose slitlike upper windows warm light shone. There dwelt, with servants and hired bodyguard, one Ivlis, a handsome red-haired wench who sometimes danced for the overlords, and who was treated with respect, not so much for that reason, but because it was said that she was the mistress of the Master of the Thieves' Guild, to whom the silk merchants paid tribute. But that very day rumor had whispered that the old master was dead and a new one taken his place. There was speculation among the silk merchants as to whether Ivlis was now out of favor and had shut herself up in fear.

A little old woman came hobbling along, her crooked cane feeling for the cracks between the slick cobblestones. Because she had a black cloak huddled around her and a black cowl over her head, one of the merchants almost collided with her in the shadows. He helped her around a slimy puddle and grinned commiseratingly when she complained in a quavering voice about the condition of the street and the manifold dangers to which an old woman was exposed. She went off mumbling to herself in a rather senile fashion, "Come on now, it's just a little farther, just a little farther. Old bones are brittle, brittle."

A loutish apprentice dyer came ambling along, bumped into her rudely, and walked on without looking back to see whether she had fallen. But he had not taken two steps before a well-planted kick jarred his spine. He whirled

around clumsily but saw only the bent old form tottering off, cane tapping uncertainly. Eyes and mouth wide open, he moved back several steps, scratching his head in bewilderment not unmixed with superstitious wonder. Later that night he gave half his wages to his old mother.

The old woman paused before the house of Ivlis, peered up at the lighted windows several times as if she were in doubt and her eyesight bad, then climbed up laboriously to the door and feebly waggled her cane against it. After a pause she rapped again, and cried out in a fretful, high voice: "Let me in. Let me in. I bear news from the gods to the dweller in this house. You inside there, let me in!"

Finally a wicket opened and a gruff, deep voice said, "Go on your way, old witch. None enters here tonight."

But the old woman took no notice of this and repeated stubbornly, "Let me in, I say. I read the future. It's cold in the street and the fog freezes my old throat. Let me in. This noon a bat came flapping and told me portentously of events destined for the dweller in this house. My old eyes can see the shadows of things which are not yet. Let me in, I say."

The slim figure of a woman was silhouetted in the window above the door. After a little it moved away.

The interchange of words between the old woman and the guard went on for some time. Then a soft, husky voice called down the stairwell, "Let the wise woman in. She's alone, isn't she? Then I will talk with her."

The door opened, though not very wide, and the black-cloaked form tottered in. The door was immediately closed and barred.

The Gray Mouser looked around at the three bodyguards standing in the darkened hall, strapping fellows with two shortswords each. They were certainly not of the Thieves' Guild. They seemed ill at ease. He did not forget to wheeze asthmatically, holding his bent side, and thank with a simpering, senile leer the one who opened the door.

The guard drew back with an ill-concealed expression of disgust. The Mouser was not a pretty sight, his face

covered with cunningly blended grease and gray ashes, studded with hideous warts of putty, and half covered with wispy gray hair straggling down from the dried scalp of a real witch—so Laavyan the wig seller had averred—that covered his pate.

Slowly the Mouser began to ascend the stair, leaning heavily on the cane and stopping every few steps as if to recover his breath. It was not easy for him to go at such a snaillike pace, with midnight so near. But he had already failed three times in attempts to enter this well-guarded house, and he knew that the slightest unnatural action might betray him. Before he was halfway up, the husky voice gave a command and a dark-haired serving woman, in a black silk tunic, hurried down, her bare feet making little noise on the stone.

"You're very kind to an old woman," he wheezed, patting the smooth hand which gripped his elbow. They began to move up a little faster. The Mouser's inner core of thought was concentrated on the jeweled skull. He could almost see it wavering in the darkness of the stairwell, a brown ovoid. That skull was the key to the Thieves' House and Fafhrd's safety. Not that Slevyas would be likely to release Fafhrd, even if the skull were brought. But having the skull, the Mouser knew he would be in a position to bargain. Without it, he would have to storm Slevyas' lair with every thief forewarned and ready for him. Last night luck and circumstance had fought on his side. It would not happen again. As these thoughts were passing through the Mouser's mind he grumbled and whined vaguely about the height of the stair and the stiffness of old joints.

The maid led him into a room strewn with thickpiled rugs and hung with silken tapestry. From the ceiling depended on heavy brassy chains a large-bowled copper lamp, intricately engraved, unlit. A soft illumination and a pleasant aromatic odor came from pale-green candles set on little tables which also held tightly-stoppered jars of perfume, small fat-bellied pots of unguent, and the like.

Standing in the center of the room was the red-haired

wench he had seen take the skull from Krovas' chamber. Her robe was of white silk. Her gleaming hair, redder than auburn, was held high with golden-headed pins. He had time now to study her face, noting the hardness of her yellow-green eyes and tight jaw, contrasted with her full soft lips and pale creamy skin. He recognized anxiety in the tense lines of her body.

"You read the future, hag?" Her question was more like a command.

"By hand and hair I read it," replied the Mouser, putting an eerie note into his quavering falsetto. "By palm and heart and eye." He tottered toward her. "Yes, and small creatures talk to me and tell me secrets." With that he suddenly drew from under his cloak a small black kitten and almost thrust it into her face. She recoiled in surprise and cried out, but he could see that the action had, in her estimation, established him as a genuine witch.

Ivlis dismissed the maid and the Mouser hastened to follow up his advantage before Ivlis' mood of awe vanished. He spoke of doom and destiny, of omens and portents, of money and love and voyages over water. He played upon the superstitions he knew to be current among the dancing girls of Lankhmar. He impressed her by speaking of "a dark man with a black beard, either recently dead or at death's door," not mentioning the name of Krovas for fear too much accuracy would awaken her suspicion. He wove facts, guesses, and impressive generalities into an intricate web.

The morbid fascination of staring into the forbidden future took hold of her and she leaned forward, breathing rapidly, twisting her slim fingers together, sucking her under lip. Her hurried questions mainly concerned "a cruel, cold-faced, large man," in whom the Mouser recognized Slevyas, and whether or not she should leave Lankhmar.

The Mouser kept up a steady stream of words, only pausing occasionally to cough, wheeze, or cackle for added realism. At times he almost believed that he was indeed a witch and that the things he spoke were dark unholy truths.

But thoughts of Fafhrd and the skull were uppermost in his mind, and he knew that midnight was close at hand. He learned much of Ivlis—for one thing, that she hated Slevyas almost more than she feared him. But the information he most wanted eluded him.

Then the Mouser saw something which stirred him on to greater efforts. Behind Ivlis a gap in the silken hangings showed the wall, and he noted that one of the large paneling stones seemed to be out of place. Suddenly he realized that the stone was of the same size, shape, and quality as that in Krovas' room. This, then, must be the other end of the passage down whcih Ivlis had escaped. He determined that it would be his means of entry to the Thieves' House, whether he brought the skull or not.

Fearing to waste more time, the Mouser sprang his trick. He paused abruptly, pinched the kitten's tail to make it mew, then sniffed several times, made a hideous face, and said, "Bones! I smell a dead man's bones!"

Ivlis caught her breath and looked up quickly at the large lamp hanging from the ceiling, the lamp which was unlit. The Mouser guessed what that glance meant.

But either his own satisfaction betrayed him or else Ivlis guessed she had been tricked into betraying herself, for she gazed at him sharply. The superstitious excitement drained from her face and the hardness came back into her eyes.

"You're a man!" she spat at him suddenly. Then with fury, "Slevyas sent you!"

With that she jerked one of the dagger-long pins from her hair and flung herself at him, striking at his eyes as he dodged. He caught her wrist with his left hand, clapped his right over her mouth. The struggle was brief and almost completely noiseless because of the thick carpeting on which they rolled. When she had been carefully trussed and gagged with strips torn from the silken hangings, the Mouser first closed the door to the stair, then pulled open the stone panel, finding the narrow passageway he had expected. Ivlis glared at him, every look a vituperation, and struggled futilely. But he knew there was no time for

explanations. Hitching up his incongruous garments he sprang nimbly for the lamp, caught the upper edge. The chains held and he raised himself until his eyes could see over the edge. Cradled inside were the gleaming, glittering skull and the jewel-tipped bones.

The upper bowl of the crystal water clock was almost empty. Fafhrd stolidly watched the twinkling drops form and fall into the lower bowl. He was on the floor with his back to the wall. His legs were tied from knee to ankle, his arms laced behind him with an equally unnecessary amount of cordage, so that he felt quite numb. To either side of him squatted an armed thief.

When the upper bowl emptied it would be midnight.

Occasionally his gaze shifted to the dark, disfigured faces which ringed the table on which the clock and certain curious instruments of torture rested. These were the aristocrats of the Thieves' Guild, men with crafty eyes and lean cheeks, who vied with one another as to the richness and greasiness of their finery. Flickering torches threw highlights on soiled reds and purples, tarnished cloth of silver and gold. But behind their masklike expressions Fafhrd sensed uncertainty. Only Slevyas, sitting in the chair of dead Krovas, seemed truly calm and self-possessed. His voice was almost casual as he interrogated a lesser thief who knelt abjectly before him.

"Are you indeed as great a coward as you would make us think?" he asked. "Would you have us believe you were afraid of an empty cellar?"

"Master, I am no coward," pleaded the thief. "I followed the northerner's footprints in the dust along the narrow corridor and almost to the bottom of the ancient stair. But no man alive could hear without terror those strange, high voices, those bony rattlings. The dry air choked my throat, a wind blew out my torch. Things tittered at me. Master, I would attempt to filch a jewel from inside a wakeful cobra's coil if you should command it. But down into that place of darkness I could not force myself."

Fafhrd saw Slevyas' lips tighten and waited for him to

pronounce sentence on the miserable thief, but remarks by the notables sitting around the table interrupted.

"There may be some truth to his tale," said one. "After all, who knows what may be in these cellars the northerner's blundering discovered?"

"Until last night we never knew they existed," echoed another. "In the trackless dust of centuries strange things may lurk."

"Last night," added a third, "we scoffed at Fissif's tale. Yet on the throat of Krovas we found the marks of bony claws."

It was as if a miasma of fear had welled up from the cellars far below. Voices were solemn. The lesser thieves who stood near the walls, bearing torches and weapons, were obviously gripped by superstitious dread. Again Slevyas hesitated, although unlike the other he seemed perplexed rather than frightened. In the hush the monotonous splashes of the falling drops sounded loudly. Fafhrd decided to fish in troubled waters.

"I will tell you myself of what I found in the cellars," he said in a deep voice. "But first tell me where you thieves bury your dead."

Appraising eyes turned upon him. This was the first time he had spoken since he came to his senses. His question was not answered, but he was allowed to speak. Even Slevyas, although he frowned at Fafhrd and fingered a thumbscrew, did not object. And Fafhrd's words were something to hear. They had a cavernous quality which suggested the northland and the Cold Waste, a dramatic ring like that in the voice of a skald. He told in detail of his descent into the dark regions below. Indeed, he added new details for effect, and made the whole experience seem like some frightening epic. The lesser thieves, unused to this kind of talk, gaped at him. Those around the table sat very still. He spun out his story as long as he dared, playing for time.

During the pauses in his speech the dripping of the water clock was no longer to be heard. Then Fafhrd's ear

caught a small grating sound, as of stone on stone. His listeners did not seem to notice it, but Fafhrd recognized it as the opening of the stone panel in the alcove, before which the black drapes still hung.

He had reached the climax of his revelations.

"There, in those forgotten cellars," his voice went a note deeper, "are the living bones of the ancient Thieves of Lankhmar. Long have they lain there, hating you who have forgotten them. The jeweled skull was that of their brother, Ohmphal. Did not Krovas tell you that the plans for stealing the skull were handed down from the dim past? It was intended that Ohmphal be restored to his brothers. Instead, Krovas desecrated the skull, tearing out the jewels. Because of that indignity, the bony hands found supernatural power with which to slay him. I know not where the skull is now. But if it has not already returned to them, those below will come for it even now, tonight. And they will not be merciful."

And then Fafhrd's words froze in his throat. His final argument, which had to do with his own release, remained unspoken. For, suspended in the air immediately in front of the black draperies of the alcove, was the skull of Ohmphal, its jeweled eyes glittering with light that was more than reflection. The eyes of the thieves followed those of Fafhrd, and the air whistled with intaken breaths of fear, fear so intense that it momentarily precluded panic. A fear such as they felt toward their living master, but magnified many times.

And then a high wailing voice spoke from the skull, "Move not, oh you craven thieves of today! Tremble and be silent. It is your ancient master who speaks. Behold, I am Ohmphal!"

The effect of that voice was peculiar. Most of the thieves shrank back, gritting their teeth and clasping their hands to control trembling. But the sweat of relief trickled down Fafhrd's head, for he recognized the Mouser. And in fat Fissif's face puzzlement mingled with fear.

"First," continued the voice from the skull, "I shall

strangle the Northman as an example to you. Cut his bonds and bring him to me. Be quick, lest I and my brothers slay you all."

With twitching hands the thieves to the right and left of Fafhrd slit his lashings. He tensed his great muscles, trying to work out the paralyzing numbness. They pulled him to his feet and pushed him forward, stumbling, toward the skull.

Abruptly the black draperies were shaken by a commotion behind them. There came a shrill animal scream of rage in an entirely different voice. The skull of Ohmphal slid down the black velvet and rolled out into the room, the thieves leaping out of its way and squealing as if for fear it came to bite their ankles with poisoned teeth. From the hole in its base fell a candle which flickered out. The draperies swung to one side and two struggling figures reeled into the room. For a moment even Fafhrd thought he was going mad at such an utterly unexpected sight as a fight between an old hag in black, with skirts tucked above her knees, and a red-haired wench with a dagger. Then the hag's cowl and wig were torn off and he recognized, under a complexion of grease and ashes, the Mouser's face. Fissif sprang forward past Fafhrd, his dagger out. The northerner, awakening to action, caught him by the shoulder, hurled him against the wall, then snatched a sword from the fingers of a nerveless thief and staggered forward himself, muscles still numb.

Meanwhile Ivlis, becoming aware of the assembled thieves, suddenly stopped trying to skewer the Mouser. Fafhrd and the Mouser turned toward the alcove, where escape lay, and were almost bowled over by the sudden outrush of Ivlis' three bodyguards, come to rescue their mistress. The bodyguards immediately attacked Fafhrd and the Mouser, since they were nearest, chasing them back across the room, striking also at the thieves with their short heavy swords.

This delay gave the thieves time to recover from their fear. Slevyas, sensing the essentials of the situation, fairly drove a group of underlings to block the alcove, galvaniz-

ing them into action with flat-edged thwacks of his sword blade. Then came chaos and pandemonium. Swords clashed and skirled together. Daggers flashed. Men were knocked down by panicky, meaningless rushes. Heads were thumped and blood flowed. Torches were hurled like clubs, fell to the floor and singed the fallen, making them howl. Thief fought thief in the confusion, the notables who had sat at the table forming a unit for self-protection. Slevyas mustered a small body of followers and rushed Fafhrd. The Mouser tripped Slevyas, but the latter whirled around on his knees and ripped the black cloak with his longsword, almost skewering the small man. Fafhrd laid around him with a chair, bowling over those who opposed him; then spilled the table over on its side, the water clock crashing to splinters.

Gradually Slevyas regained control of the thieves. He knew they were at a disadvantage in the confusion, so his first move was to call them off, mustering them in two groups, one in the alcove, from which the drapes had been torn away, the other around the door. Fafhrd and the Mouser crouched behind the overturned table in the opposite angle of the room, its thick top serving as a barricade. The Mouser was somewhat surprised to find Ivlis crouching beside him.

"I saw you try to kill Slevyas," she whispered grimly. "In any case we are compelled to join forces."

With Ivlis was one of the bodyguards. The other two lay dead or insensible, along with the dozen thieves who were scattered around the floor among the fallen torches which cast a faint flickering eerie light on the scene. Wounded thieves moaned, and crawled or were dragged out into the corridor by their comrades. Slevyas was shouting for ropes and more torches.

"We'll have to make a rush," whispered Fafhrd through closed teeth with which he was knotting a bandage around a gash in his arm. And then he suddenly raised his head and sniffed. Somehow, through that confusion and the faint sweetish smell of blood had come an odor that made his flesh prickle and creep, an odor at once alien and fa-

miliar; a fainter odor, hot, dry and dusty. For a moment the thieves fell silent and Fafhrd thought he heard the sound of distant marching, the clicking tramp of bony feet.

Then a thief cried, "Master, master, the skull, the skull! It moves! It champs its teeth!"

There was a confused sound of men drawing back, then Slevyas' curse. The Mouser, peering around the table top, saw Slevyas kick the jeweled skull toward the center of the room.

"Fools," he cried to his cowering followers, "do you still believe those lies, those old-wives' whispers? Do you think dead bones can walk? I and no other am your master! And may all dead thieves be damned eternally!"

With that he brought his sword down whistling. The skull of Ohmphal shattered like an eggshell. A whining cry of fear came from the thieves. The room grew darker as though it were filling with dust.

"Now follow me!" cried Slevyas. "Death to the intruders!"

But the thieves shrank back, darker shadows in the gloom. Fafhrd, sensing opportunity and mastering his growing fear, rushed out at Slevyas. The Mouser followed him. Fafhrd intended to kill with his third blow. First a swipe at Slevyas' longer sword to deflect it, next a quick blow at the side to bring him off guard, then finally a backhanded slash at the head.

But Slevyas was a better swordsman than that. He parried the third cut so that it whistled harmlessly over his head, then thrust at the northerner's throat. That thrust brough Fafhrd's supple muscles to full life; true, the blade grazed his neck, but his parry, striking Slevyas' sword near the hilt, numbed the Master Thief's hand. Fafhrd knew he had him then and drove him back with a mercilessly intense onslaught. He did not notice how the room was darkening. He did not wonder why Slevyas' desperate calls for assistance went unanswered; why the thieves were crowding toward the alcove, and why the wounded were crawling back into the room. Toward the doorway to the corridor he drove Slevyas, so that the man was silhouetted against it. Finally as Slevyas reached the doorway, he dis-

armed him with a blow which sent the thief's sword spinning, and put his own point to Slevyas' throat.

"Yield!" he cried.

Only then he realized the hateful dusty odor was thick in his nostrils, that the room was in utter silence, that from the corridor came a hot wind and the sound of marching bones clicking against the stone pavement. He saw Slevyas look over his shoulder, and he saw a fear like death in Slevyas' face. Then came a sudden intense darkness, like a puff of inky smoke. But before it came he saw bony arms clasp Slevyas' throat, and, as the Mouser dragged him back, he saw the doorway crowded with black skeletal forms whose eyes glittered green and red and sapphire. Then utter darkness, hideous with the screams of the thieves as they fought to crowd into the narrow tunnel in the alcove. And over and above the screams sounded thin high voices, like those of bats, cold as eternity. One cry he heard clearly.

"Slayer of Ohmphal, this is the vengeance of Ohmphal's brothers."

Then Fafhrd felt the Mouser dragging him forward again, toward the corridor door. When he could see properly, he found they were fleeing through an empty thieves' house—he, the Mouser, Ivlis, and the lone bodyguard.

Ivlis' maidservant, having barred the other end of the corridor in terror at the approaching sounds, crouched trembling in the rugs on the other side, listening in unwilling, sick horror—unable to flee—to the muffled screams and pleas and to the faint moaning sounds which bore a note of terrible triumph. The small black kitten arched its back, hair on end, and spat and hissed. Presently all sounds ceased.

Thereafter it was noted in Lankhmar that thieves were fewer. And it was rumored that the Thieves' Guild conducted strange rites at full moon, descending into deep cellars, and worshiping some sort of ancient gods. It was even said that they gave these gods, whoever they were, one-third of all they stole.

But Fafhrd, drinking with the Mouser and Ivlis and a

wench from Tovilyis in an upper room at the Silver Eel, complained that the fates were unfair.

"All that trouble and nothing to show for it! The gods have a lasting grudge against us."

The Mouser smiled, reached into his pouch, and laid three rubies on the table.

"Ohmphal's fingertips," he said briefly.

"How can you dare keep them?" questioned Ivlis. "Are you not afraid of brown bones at midnight?" She shuddered and eyed the Mouser with a certain solicitude.

He returned her gaze and replied, "My taste runs to pink bones, fittingly clothed."

The ports of men rim the Inner Sea reassuringly: Ool Hrusp and Kvarch Nar of the Eight Cities, Sarheenmar and Ilthmar the white-domed and desert-girded, Rhun near the Smoking Rocks, Lankhmar herself. But to the west lies the uncharted and monster-quickened Outer Sea, where Lankhmar's black galleys turn back and only the northerners' longships coast cautiously and there is sometimes rumor of a yellow sail from tropic Klesh.

the bleak shore

"SO you think a man can cheat death and outwit doom?" said the small, pale man, whose bulging forehead was shadowed by a black cowl.

The Gray Mouser, holding the dice box ready for a throw, paused and quickly looked sideways at the questioner.

"I said that a cunning man can cheat death for a long time."

The Silver Eel bustled with pleasantly raucous excitement. Fighting men predominated and the clank of swordsmen's harness mingled with the thump of tankards, providing a background for the shrill laughter of the women. Swaggering guardsmen elbowed the insolent bravoes of the young lords. Grinning slaves bearing open wine jars dodged nimbly between. In one corner a slave girl was dancing, the jingle of her silver anklet bells inaudible in the din. Outside the small, tight-shuttered windows a dry, whistling wind from the south filled the air with dust that eddied between the cobblestones and hazed the stars. But here all was jovial confusion.

The Gray Mouser was one of a dozen at the gaming table. He was dressed all in gray—jerkin, silken shirt, and mouseskin cap—but his dark, flashing eyes and cryptic smile made him seem more alive than any of the others,

save for the huge copper-haired barbarian next to him, who laughed immoderately and drank tankards of the sour, heavy wine of Lankhmar as if it were beer.

"They say you're a skilled swordsman and have come close to death many times," continued the small, pale man in the black robe, his thin lips barely parting as he spoke the words.

But the Mouser had made his throw, and the odd dice of Lankhmar had stopped with the matching symbols of the eel and serpent uppermost, and he was raking in triangular golden coins. The barbarian answered for him.

"Yes, the gray one handles a sword daintily enough—almost as well as myself. He's also a great cheat at dice."

"Are you, then, Fafhrd," said the other, "and do you, too, think a man can cheat death, be he ever so cunning a cheat at dice?"

The barbarian showed his white teeth in a grin and peered puzzledly at the small, pale man whose somber appearance and manner contrasted so strangely with the revelers thronging the low-ceilinged tavern fumy with wine.

"You guess right again," he said in a bantering tone. "I am Fafhrd, a northerner, ready to pit my wits against any doom." He nudged his companion. "Look, Mouser, what do you think of this little black-coated mouse who's sneaked in through a crack in the floor and wants to talk with you and me about death."

The man in black did not seem to notice the jesting insult. Again his bloodless lips hardly moved, yet his words were unaffected by the surrounding clamor, and impinged on the ears of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser with peculiar clarity.

"It is said you two came close to death in the Forbidden City of the Black Idols, and in the stone trap of Angarngi, and on the misty island in the Sea of Monsters. It is also said that you have walked with doom on the Cold Waste and through the Mazes of Klesh. But who may be sure of these things, and whether death and doom were truly near? Who knows but what you are both braggarts who have boasted once too often? Now I have heard tell that death sometimes calls to a man in a voice only he can hear. Then

he must rise and leave his friends and go to whatever place death shall bid him, and there meet his doom. Has death ever called to you in such a fashion?"

Fafhrd might have laughed, but did not. The Mouser had a witty rejoinder on the tip of his tongue, but instead he heard himself saying: "In what words might death call?"

"That would depend," said the small man. "He might look at two such as you and say the Bleak Shore. Nothing more than that. The Bleak Shore. And when he said it three times you would have to go."

This time Fafhrd tried to laugh, but the laugh never came. Both of them could only meet the gaze of the small man with the white, bulging forehead, stare stupidly into his cold, cavernous eyes. Around them the tavern roared with mirth at some jest. A drunken guardsman was bellowing a song. The gamblers called impatiently to the Mouser to stake his next wager. A giggling woman in red and gold stumbled past the small, pale man, almost brushing the black cowl that covered his pate. But he did not move. And Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser continued to stare—fascinatedly, helplessly—into his chill, black eyes, which now seemed to them twin tunnels leading into a far and evil distance. Something deeper than fear gripped them in iron paralysis. The tavern became faint and soundless, as if viewed through many thicknesses of glass. They saw only the eyes and what lay beyond the eyes, something desolate, dreary, and deadly.

"The Bleak Shore," he repeated.

Then those in the tavern saw Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser rise and without sign or word of leave-taking walk together to the low oaken door. A guardsman cursed as the huge northerner blindly shoved him out of the way. There were a few shouted questions and mocking comments—the Mouser had been winning—but these were quickly hushed, for all perceived something strange and alien in the manner of the two. Of the small, pale, black-robed man none took notice. They saw the door open. They heard the dry moaning of the wind and a hollow flapping that probably came from the awnings. They saw

an eddy of dust swirl up from the threshold. Then the door was closed and Fafhrd and the Mouser were gone.

No one saw them on their way to the great stone docks that bank the River Hlal from one end of Lankhmar to the other. No one saw Fafhrd's north-rigged, red-sailed sloop cast off and slip out into the current that slides down to the squally Inner Sea. The night was dark and the dust kept men indoors. But the next day they were gone, and the boat with them, and its Mingol crew of four—these being slave prisoners, sworn to life service, whom Fafhrd and the Mouser had brought back from their foray against the Forbidden City of the Black Idols.

About a fortnight later a tale came back to Lankhmar from Earth's End, the little harbor town that lies farthest of all towns to the west, on the very margin of the shipless Outer Sea; a tale of how a north-rigged sloop had come into port to take on an unusually large amount of food and water—unusually large because there were only six in the crew: a sullen, white-skinned northern barbarian; an unsmiling little man in gray; and four squat, stolid, black-haired Mingols. Afterward the sloop had sailed straight into the sunset. The people of Earth's End had watched the red sail until nightfall, shaking their heads at its audacious progress. When this tale was repeated in Lankhmar, there were others who shook their heads, and some who spoke significantly of the peculiar behavior of the two companions on the night of their departure. And as the weeks dragged out into months and the months slowly succeeded one another, there were many who talked of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser as two dead men.

Then Ourph the Mingol appeared and told his curious story to the dockmen of Lankhmar. There was some difference of opinion as to the validity of the story, for although Ourph spoke the soft language of Lankhmar moderately well, he was an outsider, and, after he was gone, no one could prove that he was or was not one of the four Mingols who had sailed with the north-rigged sloop. Moreover, his story did not answer several puzzling questions, which is one of the reasons that many thought it untrue.

"They were mad," said Ourph, "or else under a curse, those two men, the great one and the small one. I suspected it when they spared our lives under the very walls of the Forbidden City. I knew it for certain when they sailed west and west and west, never reefing, never changing course, always keeping the star of the ice fields on our right hand. They talked little, they slept little, they laughed not at all. Ola, they were cursed! As for us four—Teevs, Larlt, Ouwenyis, and I—we were ignored but not abused. We had our amulets to keep off evil magics. We were sworn slaves to the death. We were men of the Forbidden City. We made no mutiny.

"For many days we sailed. The sea was stormless and empty around us, and small, very small; it looked as if it bent down out of sight to the north and the south and the awful west, as if the sea ended an hour's sail from where we were. And then it began to look that way to the east, too. But the great northerner's hand rested on the steering oar like a curse, and the small gray one's hand was as firm. We four sat mostly in the bow, for there was little enough sail-tending, and diced our destinies at night and morning, and gambled for our amulets and clothes—we would have played for our hides and bones, were we not slaves.

"To keep track of the days, I tied a cord round my right thumb and moved it over a finger each day until it passed from right little finger to left little finger and came to my left thumb. Then I put it on Teev's right thumb. When it came to his left thumb he gave it to Larlt. So we numbered the days and knew them. And each day the sky became emptier and the sea smaller, until it seemed that the end of the sea was but a bowshot away from our stem and sides and stern. Teevs said that we were upon an enchanted patch of water that was being drawn through the air toward the red star that is Hell. Surely Teevs may have been right. There cannot be so much water to the west. I have crossed the Inner Sea and the Sea of Monsters—and I say so.

"It was when the cord was around Larlt's left ring finger that the great storm came at us from the southeast. For

three days it blew stronger and stronger, smiting the water into great seething waves; crags and gullies piled mast-high with foam. No other men have seen such waves nor should see them; they are not churned for us or for our oceans. Then I had further proof that our masters were under a curse. They took no notice of the storm; they let it reef their sails for them. They took no notice when Teevs was washed overboard, when we were half swamped and filled to the gunwales with spume, our bailing buckets foaming like tankards of beer. They stood in the stern, both braced against the steering oar, both drenched by the following waves, staring straight ahead, seeming to hold converse with creatures that only the bewitched can hear. Ola! They were accursed! Some evil demon was preserving their lives for a dark reason of his own. How else came we safe through the storm?

"For when the cord was on Larlt's left thumb, the towering waves and briny foam gave way to a great black sea swell that the whistling wind rippled but did not whiten. When the dawn came and we first saw it, Ouwenyis cried out that we were riding by magics upon a sea of black sand; and Larlt averred that we were fallen during the storm into the ocean of sulphurous oil that some say lies under the earth—for Larlt has seen the black, bubbling lakes of the Far East; and I remembered what Teevs had said and wondered if our patch of water had not been carried through the thin air and plunged into a wholly different sea on a wholly different world. But the small gray one heard our talk and dipped a bucket over the side and soused us with it, so that we knew our hull was still in water and that the water was salt—wherever that water might be.

"And then he bid us patch the sails and make the sloop shipshape. By midday we were flying west at a speed even greater than we had made during the storm, but so long were the swells and so swift did they move with us that we could only climb five or six in a whole day. By the Black Idols, but they were long!

"And so the cord moved across Ouwenyis' fingers. But

the clouds were as leaden dark above us as was the strange sea heavy around our hull, and we knew not if the light that came through them was that of the sun or of some wizard moon, and when we caught sight of the stars they seemed strange. And still the white hand of the northerner lay heavy on the steering oar, and still he and the gray one stared straight ahead. But on the third day of our flight across that black expanse the northerner broke silence. A mirthless, terrible smile twisted his lips, and I heard him mutter 'the Bleak Shore.' Nothing more than that. The gray one nodded, as if there were some portentous magic in the words. Four times I heard the words pass the northerner's lips, so that they were imprinted on my memory.

"The days grew darker and colder, and the clouds slid lower and lower, threatening, like the roof of a great cavern. And when the cord was on Ouwenyis' pointing finger we saw a leaden and motionless extent ahead of us, looking like the swells, but rising above them, and we knew that we were come to the Bleak Shore.

"Higher and higher that shore rose, until we could distinguish the towering basalt crags, rounded like the sea swell, studded here and there with gray boulders, whitened in spots as if by the droppings of birds—yet we saw no birds. Above the cliffs were the dark clouds, and below them was a strip of pale sand, nothing more. Then the northerner bent the steering oar and sent us straight in, as though he intended our destruction; but at the last moment he passed us at mast length by a rounded reef that hardly rose above the crest of the swell and found us harbor room. We sent the anchor over and rode safe.

"Then the northerner and the gray one, moving like men in a dream, accoutered themselves, a shirt of light chain mail and a rounded, uncrested helmet for each—both helmets and shirts white with salt from the foam and spray of the storm. And they bound their swords to their sides, and wrapped great cloaks about them, and took a little food and a little water, and bade us unship the small boat. And I rowed them ashore and they stepped out onto the

beach and walked toward the cliffs. Then, although I was much frightened, I cried out after them, 'Where are you going? Shall we follow? What shall we do?' For several moments there was no reply. Then, without turning his head, the gray one answered, his voice a low, hoarse whisper. And he said, 'Do not follow. We are dead men. Go back if you can.'

"And I shuddered and bowed my head to his words and rowed out to the ship. Ouwenyis and Larlt and I watched them climb the high, rounded crags. They grew smaller and smaller, until the northerner was no more than a tiny, slim beetle and his gray companion almost invisible, save when they crossed a whitened space. Then a wind came down from the crags and blew the swell away from the shore, and we knew we could make sail. But we stayed—for were we not sworn slaves? And am I not a Mingol?

"As evening darkened, the wind blew stronger, and our desire to depart—if only to drown in the unknown sea—became greater. For we did not like the strangely rounded basalt crags of the Bleak Shore; we did not like it that we saw no gulls or hawks or birds of any kind in the leaden air, no seaweed on the beach. And we all three began to catch glimpses of something shimmering at the summit of the cliffs. Yet it was not until the third hour of night that we upped anchor and left the Bleak Shore behind.

"There was another great storm after we were out several days, and perhaps it hurled us back into the seas we know. Ouwenyis was washed overboard and Larlt went mad from thirst, and toward the end I knew not myself what was happening. Only I was cast up on the southern coast near Quarmall and, after many difficulties, am come here to Lankhmar. But my dreams are haunted by those black cliffs and by visions of the whitening bones of my masters, and their grinning skulls staring empty-eyed at something strange and deadly."

Unconscious of the fatigue that stiffened his muscles, the Gray Mouser wormed his way past the last boulder, finding shallow handholds and footholds at the juncture of the

granite and black basalt, and finally stood erect on the top of the rounded crags that walled the Bleak Shore. He was aware that Fafhrd stood at his side, a vague, hulking figure in whitened chain-mail vest and helmet. But he saw Fafhrd vaguely, as if through many thicknesses of glass. The only things he saw clearly—and it seemed he had been looking at them for an eternity—were two cavernous, tunnellike black eyes, and beyond them something desolate and deadly, which had once been across the Outer Sea but was now close at hand. So it had been, ever since he had risen from the gaming table in the low-ceilinged tavern in Lankhmar. Vaguely he remembered the staring people of Earth's End, the foam and fury of the storm, the curve of the black sea swell, and the look of terror on the face of Ourph the Mingol; these memories, too, came to him as if through many thicknesses of glass. Dimly he realized that he and his companions were under a curse, and that they were now come to the source of that curse.

For the flat landscape that spread out before them was without sign of life. In front of them the basalt dipped down to form a large hollow of black sand—tiny particles of iron ore. In the sand were half embedded more than twoscore of what seemed to the Gray Mouser to be inky-black, oval boulders of various sizes. But they were too perfectly rounded, too regular in form to be boulders, and slowly it was borne in on the Mouser's consciousness that they were not boulders, but monstrous black eggs, a few small, some so large that a man could not have clasped his arms around them, one big as a tent.

Scattered over the sand were bones, large and small. The Mouser recognized the tusked skull of a boar, and two smaller ones—wolves. There was the skeleton of some great predatory cat. Beside it lay the bones of a horse, and beyond them the rib case of a man or ape. The bones lay all around the huge black eggs—a whitely gleaming circle.

From somewhere a toneless voice sounded, thin but clear, like a command, saying: "For warriors, a warrior's doom."

The Mouser knew the voice, for it had been echoing in his ears for weeks, ever since it had first come from the lips

of a pale little man with a bulging forehead, wearing a black robe and sitting near him in a tavern in Lankhmar.

Then he saw that what lay before him was not utterly lifeless. Movement of a sort had come to the Bleak Shore. A crack had appeared in one of the great black eggs, and then in another, and the cracks were branching, widening as bits of shell fell to the black, sandy floor.

The Mouser knew that this was happening in answer to the voice. He knew this was the end to which the thin voice had called him across the Outer Sea. Powerless to move farther, he dully watched the slow progress of this monstrous birth. Under the darkening leaden sky he watched twin deaths hatching out for him and his companion.

The first hint of their nature came in the form of a long, swordlike claw which struck out through a crack, widening it farther. Fragments of shell fell more swiftly.

The two creatures which emerged in the gathering dusk were monstrous even to the Mouser's drugged mind. Shambling things, erect like men but taller, with reptilian heads boned and crested like helmets, feet clawed like a lizard's, shoulders topped with bony spikes, forelimbs each terminating in a single yard-long claw. In the semidarkness they seemed like hideous caricatures of fighting men, armored and bearing swords. Dusk did not hide the yellow of their blinking eyes.

Then the voice called again: "For warriors, a warrior's doom."

At those words the bonds of paralysis dropped from the Mouser. For an instant he thought he was waking from a dream. But then he saw the new-hatched creatures racing toward them, a shrill, eager screeching issuing from their long muzzles. From beside him he heard a quick, rasping sound as Fafhrd's sword whipped from its scabbard. Then the Mouser drew his own blade, and a moment later it crashed against a steellike claw which thrust at his throat. Simultaneously, Fafhrd parried a like blow from the other monster.

What followed was nightmare. Claws that were swords

slashed and stabbed. Not so swiftly that they could not be parried, though there were four against two. Counter-thrusts glanced off impenetrable bony armor. Both creatures suddenly wheeled, striking at the Mouser. Fafhrd drove in from the side, saving him. Slowly the two companions were driven back toward where the crag sheered off. The beasts seemed tireless, creatures of bone and metal rather than flesh. The Mouser foresaw the end. He and Fafhrd might hold them off for a while longer, but eventually fatigue would supervene; their parries would become slower, weaker; the beasts would have them.

As if in anticipation of this, the Mouser felt a claw nick his wrist. It was then that he remembered the dark, cavernous eyes that had drawn them across the Outer Sea, the voice that had loosed doom upon them. He was gripped with a strange, mad rage—not against the beasts but their master. He seemed to see the black, dead eyes staring at him from the black sand. Then he lost control of his actions. When the two monsters next attempted a double attack on Fafhrd he did not turn to help, but instead dodged past and dashed down into the hollow, toward the embedded eggs.

Left to face the monsters alone, Fafhrd fought like a madman himself, his great sword whistling as his last resources of energy jolted his muscles. He hardly noticed when one of the beasts turned back to pursue his comrade.

The Mouser stood among the eggs, facing one of a glossier hue and smaller than most. Vindictively he brought his sword crashing down upon it. The blow numbed his hand, but the egg shattered.

Then the Mouser knew the source of the evil of the Bleak Shore, lying here and sending its spirit abroad, lying here and calling men to doom. Behind him he heard the scrabbling steps and eager screeching of the monster chosen for his destruction. But he did not turn. Instead, he raised his sword and brought it down whirring on the half-embryonic creature gloating in secret over the creatures he had called to death, down on the bulging forehead of the small pale man with the thin lips.

Then he waited for the finishing blow of the claw. It did not come. Turning, he saw the monster sprawled on the black sand. Around him, the deadly eggs were crumbling to dust. Silhouetted against the lesser darkness of the sky, he saw Fafhrd stumbling toward him, sobbing out vague words of relief and wonder in a deep, throaty voice. Death was gone from the Bleak Shore, the curse cut off at the root. From out of the night sounded the exultant cry of a sea bird, and Fafhrd and the Mouser thought of the long, trackless road leading back to Lankhmar.

Five sleeps southward from the Black Cliffs, Fafhrd and the Mouser fought and made friends with a shepherd tribe, camping with them through the winter months and learning their language, which was oddly akin to that spoken in the Ghoulish Hills, half a world away. But hearing rumors of forests and towns and even a seaport to the south, the old nostalgia for Lankhmar returned to them with the spring and they found themselves a guide and pressed on.

the howling tower

THE sound was not loud, yet it seemed to fill the whole vast, darkening plain, and the palely luminous, hollow sky. A wailing and howling, so faint and monotonous that it might have been inaudible save for the pulsing rise and fall. An ancient, ominous sound that was somehow in harmony with the wild, sparsely vegetated landscape and the strange, barbaric garb of the three men who sheltered in a little dip in the ground, lying close to a dying fire.

"Wolves, perhaps. I have heard them howl that way on the Cold Waste when they hunted me down. But a whole ocean sunders us from the Cold Waste and there's a difference between the sounds, Gray Mouser."

The Mouser pulled his gray woolen cloak closer around him. Then they looked at the third man, who had not spoken. The third man was meanly clad, and his cloak was a little ragged and the scabbard of his short sword was frayed. With surprise, they saw that his eyes stared, white circled, from his pinched, leathery face and that he trembled.

"You've been over these plains many times before," Fafhrd said to him, speaking the guttural language of the guide. "That's why we've asked you to show us the way. You must know this country well." The last words pointed the question.

The guide gulped, nodded jerkily. "I've heard it before, not so loud," he said in a quick, vague voice. "Not at this time of year. Men have been known to vanish. There are stories. They say men hear it in their dreams and are lured away—not a good sound."

"No wolf's a good wolf," rumbled Fafhrd amusedly.

It was still light enough for the Mouser to catch the obstinate, guarded look on the guide's face as he went on talking.

"I never saw a wolf in these parts, nor spoke with a man who killed one." He paused, then rambled off abstractedly. "They tell of an old tower somewhere out on the plains. They say the sound is strongest there. I have not seen it. They say——"

Abruptly he stopped. He was not trembling now, seemed withdrawn into himself. The Mouser prodded him with a few tempting questions, but the answers were little more than mouth noises, neither affirmative nor negative.

The fire glowed through white ashes, died. A little wind rustled the scant grasses. The sound had ceased now, or else it had sunk so deeply into their minds that it was no longer audible. The Mouser, peering sleepily over the humped horizon of Fafhrd's great cloaked body, turned his thoughts to far-off, many-taverned Lankhmar, leagues and leagues away across alien lands and a whole uncharted ocean. The limitless darkness pressed down.

Next morning the guide was gone. Fafhrd laughed and made light of the occurrence as he stood stretching and snuffing the cool, clear air.

"Foh! I could tell these plains were not to his liking, for all his talk of having crossed them seven times. A bundle of superstitious fears! You saw how he quaked when the little wolves began to howl. My word on it, he's run back to his friends we left at the last water."

The Mouser, fruitlessly scanning the empty horizon, nodded. Indeed, there seemed no other explanation. To have gotten away without waking them, the man must have crept with intentional noiselessness. The Mouser felt through his pouch.

"Well, at least he's not robbed his—except for the two gold pieces we gave him to bind the bargain."

Fafhrd's laughter pealed and he thumped the Mouser between the shoulder blades. The Mouser caught him by the wrist, threw him with a twist and a roll, and they wrestled on the ground until the Mouser was pinned.

"Come on," grinned Fafhrd, springing up. "It won't be the first time we've traveled strange country alone."

They tramped far that day. The springiness of the Mouser's wiry body enabled him to keep up with Fafhrd's long strides. Toward evening a whirring arrow from Fafhrd's bow brought down a sort of small antelope with delicately ridged horns. A little earlier they had found an unsullied waterhole and filled their skin bags. When the late summer sunset came, they made camp and munched carefully broiled loin and crisped bits of fat.

The Mouser sucked his lips and fingers clean, then strolled to the top of a small nearby hummock to survey the line of their next day's march. The haze that had curtailed vision during the afternoon was gone now, and he could peer far over the rolling, swelling grasslands through the cool, tangy air. At that moment the road to Lankhmar did not seem so long, or so weary. Then his sharp eyes spied an irregularity in the horizon toward which they were tending. Too distinct for trees, too evenly shaped for rock; and he had seen no trees or rock in this country. It stood out sharp and tiny against the pale sky. No, it was built by man; a tower of some sort.

At that moment the sound returned. It seemed to come from everywhere at once; as if the sky itself were wailing faintly, as if the wide, solid ground were baying mournfully. It was louder this time, and there was in it a strange confusion of sadness and threat, grief and menace.

Fafhrd jumped to his feet and waved his arms wildly, and the Mouser heard him bellow out in a great, jovial voice, "Come, little wolves, come and share our fire and singe your cold noses. I will send my bronze-beaked birds winging to welcome you, and my friend will show you how a slung stone can buzz like a bee. We will teach you the mys-

teries of sword and ax. Come, little wolves, and be guests of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser!"

The huge laugh with which he ended this challenge drowned out the alien sound and it seemed slow in reasserting itself, as though laughter were a stronger thing. The Mouser felt cheered and it was with a light heart that he told Fafhrd of what he had seen, and reminded him of what the guide had said about the noise and the tower.

Fafhrd only laughed again and guessed, "Perhaps the sad, furry ones have a den there. We shall find out tomorrow, since we go that way. I would like to kill a wolf."

The big man was in a jolly mood and would not talk with the Mouser about serious or melancholy things. Instead, he sang drinking songs and repeated old tavern jokes, chuckling hugely and claiming that they made him feel as drunk as wine. He kept up such an incessant clamor that the Mouser could not tell whether the strange howling had ceased, though he rather imagined he heard it once or twice. Certainly it was gone by the time they wrapped themselves up for sleep in the wraithlike starlight.

Next morning Fafhrd was gone. Even before the Mouser had halooed for him and scanned the nearby terrain, he knew that his foolish, self-ridiculed fears had become certainties. He could still see the tower, although in the flat, yellow light of morning it seemed to have receded, as though it were seeking to evade him. He even fancied he saw a tiny moving figure nearer to the tower than to him. That, he knew, was only imagination. The distance was too great. Nevertheless, he wasted little time in swallowing some cold meat, which still had a savory taste, in wrapping up some more for his pouch, and in taking a gulp of water. Then he set out at a long, springy lope, a pace he knew he could hold for hours.

At the bottom of the next swell in the plain he found slightly softer ground, cast up and down it for Fafhrd's footprints and found them. They were wide-spaced, made by a man running.

Toward midday he found a waterhole, lay down to drink and rest a little. A short way back he had again seen

Fafhrd's prints. Now he noted another set in the soft earth; not Fafhrd's, but roughly parallel to his. They were at least a day older, wide-spaced, too, but a little wobbly. From their size and shape they might very well have been made by the guide's sandals; the middle of the print showed faintly the mark of thongs such as he had worn about the instep.

The Mouser loped doggedly on. His pouch, rolled cloak, water bag, and weapons were beginning to feel a burden. The tower was appreciably closer, although the sun haze masked any details. He calculated he had almost covered half the distance.

The slight successive swells in the prairie land seemed as endless as those in a dream. He noticed them not so much by sight as by the infinitesimal hindrance and easing they gave his lope. The little low clumps of bush and brush by which he measured his progress were all the same. The infrequent gullies were no wider than could be taken in a stride. Once a coiled greenish serpent raised its flat head from the rock on which it was sunning and observed his passing. Occasionally grasshoppers whirred out of his path. He ran with his feet close to the ground to conserve energy, yet there was a characteristic leap to his stride, for he was used to matching that of a taller man. His nostrils flared wide, sucking and expelling air. The wide mouth was set. There was a grim, fixed look to the black eyes above the browned cheeks. He knew that even at his best he would be hard put to equal the speed in Fafhrd's rangy, long-muscled frame.

Clouds sailed in from the north, casting great, hurrying shadows over the landscape, finally blotting out the sun altogether. He could see the tower better now. It was of a dark color, with black specks that might be small windows.

It was while he was pausing atop a rise for a breathing spell that the sound re-commenced, taking him unaware, sending a shiver over his flesh. It might have been the low clouds that gave it greater power and an eerie, echoing quality. It might have been his being alone that made it seem less sorrowful and more menacing. But it was unde-

niably louder, and its rhythmic swells came like great gusts of wind.

The Mouser had counted on reaching the tower by sunset. But the early appearance of the sound upset his calculations and did not bode well for Fafhrd. His judgment told him he could cover the rest of the distance at something like top speed. Instantly he came to a decision. He tossed his big pouch, water skin, bundled cloak, sword, and harness into a clump of bushes; kept only his light inner jerkin, long dagger, and sling. Thus lightened, he spurted ahead, feet flying. The low clouds darkened. A few drops of rain spattered. He kept his eyes on the ground, watching for inequalities and slippery spots. The sound seemed to intensify and gain new unearthliness of timbre with every bounding stride he took forward.

Away from the tower the plain had been empty and vast, but here it was desolate. The sagging or tumbled wooden outbuildings, the domestic grains and herbs run wild and dying out, the lines of stunted and toppled trees, the suggestion of fences and paths and ruts—all combined to give the impression that human life had once been here but had long since departed. Only the great stone tower, with its air of obstinate solidity, and with sound pouring from it or seeming to pour from it, was alive.

The Mouser, pretty well winded, though not shaky, now changed his course and ran in an oblique direction to take advantage of the cover provided by a thin line of trees and wind-blown scrub. Such caution was second nature with him. All his instincts clamored against the possibility of meeting a wolf or hound pack on open ground.

He had worked his way past and part way around the tower before he came to the conclusion that there was no line of concealment leading all the way up to the base. It stood a little aloof from the ruins around it.

The Mouser paused in the shelter afforded by a weather-silvered, buckled outbuilding; automatically searched about until he found a couple of small stones whose weight suited his sling. His sturdy chest still worked like a bellows, drink-

ing air. Then he peered around a corner at the tower and stood there crouched a little, frowning.

It was not as high as he had thought; five stories or perhaps six. The narrow windows were irregularly placed, and did not give any clear idea of inner conformation. The stones were large and rudely hewn; seemed firmly set, save for those of the battlement, which had shifted somewhat. Almost facing him was the dark, uninformative rectangle of a doorway.

There was no rushing such a place, was the Mouser's thought; no sense in rushing a place that had no sign of defenders. There was no way of getting at it unseen; a watcher on the battlements would have noted his approach long ago. One could only walk up to it, tensely alert for unexpected attacks. And so the Mouser did that.

Before he had covered half the distance his sinews were taut and straining. He was mortally certain that he was being watched by something more than unfriendly. A day's running had made him a little light-headed, and his senses were abnormally clear. Against the unending hypnotic background of the howling he heard the splatters of the separate raindrops, not yet become a shower. He noted the size and shape of each dark stone around the darker doorway. He smelt the characteristic odor of stone, wood, soil, but yet no heavy animal smell. For the thousandth time he tried to picture some possible source for the sound. A dozen hound packs in a cavern underground? That was close, but not close enough. Something eluded him. And now the dark walls were very near, and he strained his eyes to penetrate the gloom of the doorway.

The remote grating sound might not have been enough of a warning, for he was almost in a trance. It may have been the sudden, very slight increase of darkness over his head that twanged the taut bowstrings of his muscles and sent him lunging with catlike rapidity into the tower—instinctively, without pausing to glance up. Certainly he had not an instant to spare, for he felt an unyielding surface graze his escaping body and flick his heels. A spurt of wind

rushed past him from behind, and the jar of a mighty impact staggered him. He spun around to see a great square of stone half obscuring the doorway. A few moments before it had formed part of the battlement.

Looking at it as it lay there denting the ground, he grinned for the first time that day and almost laughed in relief.

The silence was profound, startling. It occurred to the Mouser that the howling had ceased utterly. He glanced around the barren, circular interior, then started up the curving stone stair that hugged the wall. His grin was dangerous now, businesslike. On the first level above he found Fafhrd and—after a fashion—the guide. But he found a puzzle, too.

Like that below, the room occupied the full circumference of the tower. Light from the scattered, slitlike windows dimly revealed the chests lining the walls and the dried herbs and dessicated birds, small mammals, and reptiles hanging from the ceiling, suggesting an apothecary's shop. There was litter everywhere, but it was a tidy litter, seeming to have a tortuously logical arrangement all its own. On a table was a hodgepodge of stoppered bottles and jars, stone basins and mortars, odd instruments of horn, glass, and bone, and a brazier in which charcoal smoldered. There was also a plate of gnawed bones and beside it a brass-bound book of parchment, spread open by a dagger set across the pages.

Fafhrd lay supine on a bed of skins laced to a low wooden framework. He was pale and breathed heavily, looked as if he had been drugged. He did not respond when the Mouser shook him gently and whispered his name. But the thing that baffled the Mouser was the multitude of linen bandages wound around Fafhrd's limbs and chest and throat, for they were unstained and, when he parted them, there were no wounds beneath. They were obviously not bonds.

And lying beside Fafhrd, so close that his big hand touched the hilt, was Fafhrd's great sword, unsheathed.

It was only then that he saw the guide, huddled in a dark corner behind the couch. He was similarly bandaged. But the bandages were stiff with rusty stains, and it was easy to see that he was dead.

The Mouser tried again to wake Fafhrd, but the big man's face stayed a marble mask. The Mouser did not feel that Fafhrd was actually there, and the feeling frightened and angered him.

As he stood nervously puzzling he became aware of slow steps descending the stone stair. Slowly they circled the tower. The sound of heavy breathing was heard, coming in regular spaced gasps. The Mouser crouched behind the tables, his eyes glued on the black hole in the ceiling through which the stair vanished.

The man who emerged was old and small and bent, dressed in garments as tattered and uncouth and musty-looking as the contents of the room. He was partly bald, with a matted tangle of gray hair around his large ears. When the Mouser sprang up and menaced him with a drawn dagger he did not attempt to flee, but went into what seemed an ecstasy of fear—trembling, babbling throaty sounds, and darting his arms about meaninglessly.

The Mouser thrust a stubby candle into the brazier, held it to the old man's face. He had never seen eyes so wide with terror—they jutted out like little white balls—nor lips so thin and unfeelingly cruel.

The first intelligible words that issued from the lips were hoarse and choked; the voice of a man who has not spoken for a long time.

"You are dead. You are dead!" he cackled at the Mouser, pointing a shaky finger. "You should not be here. I killed you. Why else have I kept the great stone cunningly balanced, so that a touch would send it over? I knew you did not come because the sound lured you. You came to hurt me and to help your friend. So I killed you. I saw the stone fall. I saw you under the stone. You could not have escaped it. You are dead."

And he tottered toward the Mouser, brushing at him as

though he could dissipate the Mouser like smoke. But when his hands touched solid flesh he squealed and stumbled away.

The Mouser followed him, moving his knife suggestively. "You are right as to why I came," he said. "Give me back my friend. Rouse him."

To his surprise, the old man did not cringe, but abruptly stood his ground. The look of terror in the unblinking eyes underwent a subtle change. The terror was still there, but there was something more. Bewilderment vanished and something else took its place. He walked past the Mouser and sat down on a stool by the table.

"I am not much afraid of you," he muttered, looking sideways. "But there are those of whom I am very much afraid. And I fear you only because you will try to hinder me from protecting myself against them or taking the measures I know I must take." He became plaintive. "You must not hinder me. You must not."

The Mouser frowned. The ghastly look of terror—and something more—that warped the old man's face seemed a permanent thing, and the strange words he spoke did not sound like lies.

"Nevertheless, you must rouse my friend."

The old man did not answer this. Instead, after one quick glance at the Mouser, he stared vacantly at the wall, shaking his head, and began to talk.

"I do not fear you. Yet I know the depths of fear. You do not. Have you lived alone with *that sound* for years on years, knowing what it meant? I have.

"Fear was born into me. It was in my mother's bones and blood. And in my father's and in my brother's. There was too much magic and loneliness in this, our home, and in my people. When I was a child they all feared and hated me—even the slaves and the great hounds that before me slavered and growled and snapped.

"But my fears were stronger than theirs, for did they not die one by one in such a way that no suspicion fell upon me until the end? I knew it was one against many, and I took no chances. When it began, they always thought I

would be the next to go!" He cackled at this. "They thought I was small and weak and foolish. But did not my brothers die as if strangled by their own hands? Did not my mother sicken and languish? Did not my father give a great cry and leap from the tower's top?

"The hounds were the last to go. They hated me most—even more than my father hated me—and the smallest of them could have torn out my throat. They were hungry because there was no one left to feed them. But I lured them into the deep cellar, pretending to flee from them; and when they were all inside I slipped out and barred the door. For many a night thereafter they bayed and howled at me, but I knew I was safe. Gradually the baying grew less and less as they killed each other, but the survivors gained new life from the bodies of the slain. They lasted a long time. Eventually there was only one single thin voice left to howl vengefully at me. Each night I went to sleep, telling myself, 'Tomorrow there will be silence.' But each morning I was awakened by the cry. Then I forced myself to take a torch and go down and peer through the wicket in the door of the cellar. But though I watched for a long time there was no movement, save that of the flickering shadows, and I saw nothing but white bones and tatters of skin. And I told myself that the sound would soon go away."

The old man's thin lips were twisted into a pitiful and miserable expression that sent a chill over the Mouser.

"But the sound lived on, and after a long while it began to grow louder again. Then I knew that my cunning had been in vain. I had killed their bodies, but not their ghosts, and soon they would gain enough power to return and slay me, as they had always intended. So I studied more carefully my father's books of magic and sought to destroy their ghosts utterly or to curse them to such far-off places that they could never reach me. For a while I seemed to be succeeding, but the scales turned and they began to get the better of me. Closer and closer they came, and sometimes I seemed to catch my father's and brothers' voices, almost lost among the howling.

"It was on a night when they must have been very close that an exhausted traveler came running to the tower. There was a strange look in his eyes, and I thanked the beneficent god who had sent him to my door, for I knew what I must do. I gave him food and drink, and in his drink I mingled a liquid that enforced sleep and sent his naked ghost winging out of his body. *They* must have captured and torn it, for presently the man bled and died. But it satisfied them somewhat, for their howling went a long way off, and it was a long time before it began to creep back. Thereafter the gods were good and always sent me a guest before the sound came too close. I learned to band-age those I drugged so that they would last longer, and their deaths satisfy the howling ones more fully."

The old man paused then, and shook his head queerly and made a vague, reproachful, clucking noise with his tongue.

"But what troubles me now," he said, "is that they have become greedier, or perhaps they have seen through my cunning. For they are less easy to satisfy, and press at me closely and never go far away. Sometimes I wake in the night, hearing them snuffing about, and feeling their muz-zles at my throat. I must have more men to fight them for me. I must. He"—pointing at the stiff body of the guide—"was nothing to them. They took no more notice of him than a dry bone. That one"—his finger wavered over to-ward Fafhrd—"is big and strong. He should hold them back for a long time."

It was dark outside now, and the only light came from the guttering candle. The Mouser glared at the old man where he sat perched on the stool like some ungainly plucked foul. Then he looked to where Fafhrd lay, watched the great chest rise and fall, saw the strong, pallid jaw jut-ting up over high wrappings. And at that, a terrible anger and an unnerving, boundless irritation took hold of him and he hurled himself upon the old man.

But at the instant he started his long dagger on the downward stroke the sound gushed back. It seemed to overflow from some pit of darkness, and to inundate the

tower and plain so that the walls vibrated and dust puffed out from the dead things hanging from the ceiling.

The Mouser stopped the blade a hand's breadth from the throat of the old man, whose head, twisted back, jiggled in terror. For the return of the sound forcibly set the question: Could anyone but the old man save Fafhrd now? The Mouser wavered between alternatives, pushed the old man away, knelt by Fafhrd's side, shook him, spoke to him. There was no response. Then he heard the voice of the old man. It was shaky and half drowned by the sound, but it carried an almost gloating note of confidence.

"Your friend's body is poised on the brink of life. If you handle it roughly it may overbalance. If you strip off the bandages he will only die the quicker. You cannot help him." Then, reading the Mouser's question, "No, there is no antidote." Then hastily, as if he feared to take away all hope, "But he will not be defenseless against them. He is strong. His ghost may be strong, too. He may be able to weary them out. If he lives until midnight he may return."

The Mouser turned and looked up at him. Again the old man seemed to read something in the Mouser's merciless eyes, for he said, "My death by your hand will not satisfy those who howl. If you kill me, you will not save your friend, but doom him. Being cheated of my ghost, they will rend his utterly."

The wizened body trembled in an ecstasy of excitement and terror. The hands fluttered. The head bobbled back and forth, as if with the palsy. It was hard to read anything in that twitching, saucer-eyed face. The Mouser slowly got to his feet.

"Perhaps not," said the Mouser. "Perhaps as you say, your death will doom him." He spoke slowly and in a loud, measured tone. "Nevertheless, I shall take the chance of killing you right now unless you suggest something better."

"Wait," said the old man, pushing at the Mouser's dagger and drawing a pricked hand away. "Wait. There is a way you could help him. Somewhere out there"—he made a sweeping, upward gesture with his hand—"your friend's ghost is battling them. I have more of the drug left. I will

give you some. Then you can fight them side by side. Together you may defeat them. But you must be quick. Look! Even now they are at him!"

The old man pointed at Fafhrd. The bandage on the barbarian's left arm was no longer unstained. There was a growing splotch of red on the left wrist—the very place where a hound might take hold. Watching it, the Mouser felt his insides grow sick and cold. The old man was pushing something into his hand. "Drink this. Drink this now," he was saying.

The Mouser looked down. It was a small glass vial. The deep purple of the liquid corresponded with the hue of a dried trickle he had seen at the corner of Fafhrd's mouth. Like a man bewitched, he plucked out the stopper, raised it slowly to his lips, paused.

"Swiftly! Swiftly!" urged the old man, almost dancing with impatience. "About half is enough to take you to your friend. The time is short. Drink! Drink!"

But the Mouser did not. Struck by a sudden, new thought, he eyed the old man over his upraised hand. And the old man must have instantly read the import of that thought, for he snatched up the dagger lying on the book and lunged at the Mouser with unexpected rapidity. Almost the thrust went home, but the Mouser recovered his wits and struck sideways with his free fist at the old man's hand so that the dagger clattered across the floor. Then, with a rapid, careful movement, the Mouser set the vial on the table. The old man darted after him, snatching at it, seeking to upset it, but the Mouser's iron grip closed on his wrists. He was forced to the floor, his arms pinioned, his head pushed back.

"Yes," said the Mouser, "I shall drink. Have no fear on that score. But you shall drink, too."

The old man gave a strangled scream and struggled convulsively. "No! No!" he cried. "Kill me! Kill me with your knife! But not the drink! Not the drink!" The Mouser, kneeling on his arms to pinion them, pried at his jaw. Suddenly he became quiet and stared up, a peculiar lucidity

in his white-circled, pin-point-pupiled eyes. "It's no use. I sought to trick you," he said. "I gave the last of the drug to your friend. The stuff you hold is poison. We shall both die miserably, and your friend will be irrevocably doomed."

But when he saw that the Mouser did not heed this, he began once more to struggle like a maniac. The Mouser was inexorable. Although the base of his thumb was bitten deep, he forced the old man's jaws apart, held his nose and poured the thick purple liquor down. The face of the old man grew red and the veins stood out. When the gulp came it was like a death rattle. Then the Mouser drank off the rest—it was salty like blood and had a sickeningly sweet odor—and waited.

He was torn with revulsion at what he had done. Never had he inflicted such terror on man or woman before. He would much rather have killed. The look on the old man's face was grotesquely similar to that of a child under torture. Only that poor aged wretch, thought the Mouser, knew the full meaning of the howling that even now dinned menacingly in their ears. The Mouser almost let him reach the dagger toward which he was weakly squirming. But he thought of Fafhrd and gripped the old man tight.

Gradually the room filled with haze and began to swing and slowly spin. The Mouser grew dizzy. It was as if the sound were dissolving the walls. Something was wrenching at his body and prying at his mind. Then came utter blackness, whirled and shaken by a pandemonium of howling.

But there was no sound at all on the vast alien plain to which the blackness suddenly gave way. Only sight and a sense of great cold. A cloudless, sourceless moonlight revealed endless sweeps of smooth black rock and sharply edged the featureless horizon.

He was conscious of a thing that stood by him and seemed to be trying to hide behind him. Then, at a small distance, he noted a pale form which he instinctively knew to be Fafhrd. And around the pale form seethed a pack of black, shadowy animal shapes, leaping and retreating, worrying at the pale form, their eyes glowing like the

moonlight, but brighter, their long muzzles soundlessly snarling. The thing beside him seemed to shrink closer. And then the Mouser rushed forward toward his friend.

The shadow pack turned on him and he braced himself to meet their onslaught. But the leader leaped past his shoulder, and the rest divided and flowed by him like a turbulent black stream. Then he realized that the thing which had sought to hide behind him was no longer there. He turned and saw that the black shapes pursued another small pale form.

It fled fast, but they followed faster. Over sweep after sweep of rock the hunt continued. He seemed to see taller, man-shaped figures among the pack. Slowly they dwindled in size, became tiny, vague. And still the Mouser felt the horrible hate and fear that flowed from them.

Then the sourceless moonlight faded, and only the cold remained, and that, too, dissipated, leaving nothing.

When he awoke, Fafhrd's face was looking down at him, and Fafhrd was saying, "Lie still, little man. Lie still. No, I'm not badly hurt. A torn hand. Not bad. No worse than your own."

But the Mouser shook his head impatiently and pushed his aching shoulder off the couch. Sunlight was knifing in through the narrow windows, revealing the dustiness of the air. Then he saw the body of the old man.

"Yes," Fafhrd said as the Mouser lay back weakly. "His fears are ended now. They've done with him. I should hate him. But who can hate such tattered flesh? When I came to the tower he gave me the drink. There was something wrong in my head. I believed what he said. He told me it would make me a god. I drank, and it sent me to a cold waste in hell. But now it's done with and we're still on earth."

The Mouser, eying the thoroughly and unmistakably dead things that dangled from the ceiling, felt content.

The exploits of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser on the transmarine continent are in general the most sketchily reported by Sheelba of the Eyeless Face, while Srith of the Scrolls is silent. All we know is that they reached a meager river-port —the name Darkwater has been mentioned—whose sailors were even more reluctant and less prepared than the Lankhmariners to venture on the Outer Sea. It was at best a patchwork craft that the two adventurers must trust for the long homeward voyage.

the sunken land

"I WAS born with luck as a twin!" roared Fafhrd jovially, leaping up so swiftly that the cranky sloop rocked a little in spite of its outriggers. "I catch a fish in the middle of the ocean. I rip up its belly. And look, little man, what I find!"

The Gray Mouser drew back from the fish-bloodied hand thrust almost into his face, wrinkled his nose with sneering fastidiousness, raised his left eyebrow and peered. The object did not seem very small even on Fafhrd's broad palm, and although slimed-over a little, was indubitably gold. It was both a ring and a key, the key part set at a right angle, so that it would lie along the finger when worn. There were carvings of some sort. Instinctively the Gray Mouser did not like the object. It somehow focused the vague uneasiness he had felt now for several days.

To begin with, he did not like the huge, salty Outer Sea, and only Fafhrd's bold enthusiasm and his own longing for the land of Lankhmar had impelled him to embark on this long, admittedly risky voyage across unchartered deeps. He did not like the fact that a school of fish was making the water boil at such a great distance from any land. Even the uniformly stormless weather and favorable winds disturbed him, seeming to indicate correspondingly great misfortunes held in store, like a growing thundercloud in quiet air. Too much good luck was always dangerous. And now

this ring, acquired without effort by an astonishingly lucky chance.

They peered at it more closely, Fafhrd slowly turning it round. The carving on the ring part, as far as one could make out, represented a sea monster dragging down a ship. It was highly stylized, however, and there was little detail. One might be mistaken. What puzzled the Mouser most, since he had traveled to far places and knew much of the world, was that he did not recognize the style.

But in Fafhrd it roused strange memories. Recollections of certain legends told round flickering driftwood fires through the long northern nights; tales of great seafarings and distant raids made in ancient days; firelight glimpses of certain bits of loot taken by some uncountably distant ancestor and considered too traditionally significant to barter or sell or even give away; ominously vague warnings used to frighten little boys who were inclined to swim or sail too far out. For a moment his green eyes clouded and his windburned face became serious, but only for a moment.

"A pretty enough thing, you'll agree," he said, laughing. "Whose door do you think it unlocks? Some king's mistress, I'd say. It's big enough for a king's finger." He tossed it up, caught it, and wiped it on the rough cloth of his tunic.

"I wouldn't wear it," said the Mouser. "It was probably eaten from a drowned man's hand and sucked poison from the sea ooze. Throw it back."

"And fish for a bigger one?" asked Fafhrd, grinning. "No, I'm content with this." He thrust it down on the middle finger of his left hand, doubled up his fist, and surveyed it critically. "Good for bashing people with, too," he remarked.

Then, seeing a big fish flash out of the water and almost flop into the cockpit, he snatched up his bow, fitted to the string a featherless arrow whose head was barbed and heavily weighted, and stared down over the side, one foot extended along the outrigger. A light, waxed line was attached to the arrow.

The Mouser watched him, not without envy. Fafhrd,

big rangy man that he was, seemed to acquire an altogether new litheness and sureness of movement whenever they were on shipboard. He became as nimble as the Mouser was on shore. The Mouser was no landlubber and could swim as well as Fafhrd, but he always felt a trifle uneasy when there was only water in sight, day in and day out, just as Fafhrd felt uneasy in cities, though relishing taverns and street fights. On shipboard the Mouser became cautious and apprehensive; he made a point of watching for slow leaks, creeping fires, tainted food and rotten cordage. He disapproved of Fafhrd's constant trying out of new rigs and waiting until the last moment before reefing sail. It irked him a little that he couldn't quite call it foolhardy.

Fafhrd continued to scan intently the swelling, sliding waters. His long, copper-red hair was shoved back over his ears and knotted securely. He was clothed in rough, brownish tunic and trousers. Light leather slippers, easily kicked off, were on his feet. Belt, longsword, and other weapons were, of course, wrapped away in oiled cloth against corrosion and rust. And there were no jewels or ornaments, save for the ring.

The Mouser's gaze shifted past him to where clouds were piling up a little on the horizon off the bow to starboard. He wondered, almost with relief, whether this mightn't be the dirty weather due them. He pulled his thin gray tunic closer at his throat and shifted the tiller a little. The sun, near setting, projected his crouching shadow against the brownish sail.

Fafhrd's bow twanged and the arrow plummeted. Line hissed from the reel he held in his arrow hand. He checked it with his thumb. It slackened a trifle, then jerked off toward the stern. Fafhrd's foot slid along the outrigger until it stopped against the pontoon, a good three arm's lengths from the side. He let the other foot slide after it and lay there effortlessly braced, sea drenching his legs, playing the fish carefully, laughing and grunting satisfiedly.

"And what was your luck this time?" the Mouser asked afterward, as Fafhrd served them smoking-hot, white ten-

der flesh broiled over the firebox in the snug cabin forward. "Did you get a bracelet and necklace to match the ring?"

Fafhard grinned with his mouth full and did not answer, as if there were nothing in the world to do but eat. But when they stretched themselves out later in the starry, cloud-broken darkness alive with a racing wind from starboard that drove their craft along at an increasing speed, he began to talk.

"I think they called the land Simorgya. It sank under the sea ages ago. Yet even then my people had gone raiding against it, though it was a long sail out and a weary beat homeward. My memory's uncertain. I only heard scraps of talk about it when I was a little child. But I did see a few trinkets carved somewhat like this ring; just a very few. The legends, I think, told that the men of far Simorgya were mighty magicians, claiming power over wind and waves and the creatures below. Yet the sea gulped them down for all that. Now they're there." He rotated his hand until his thumb pointed at the bottom of the boat. "My people, the legends say, went raiding against them one summer, and none of the boats returned, save one, which came back after hope had been lost, its men almost dead from thirst. They told of sailing on and on, and never reaching Simorgya, never sighting its rocky coast and squat, many-windowed towers. Only the empty sea. More raiders went out the next summer and the next, yet none ever found Simorgya."

"But in that case," questioned the Mouser sharply, "may we not even now be sailing over that sunken land? May not that very fish you caught have swum in and out the windows of those towers?"

"Who can say?" answered Fafhrd, a little dreamily. "The ocean's big. If we're where we think we are—that is, halfway home—it might be the case. Or not. I do not know if there ever really was a Simorgya. The legend-makers are great liars. In any case, that fish could hardly have been so ancient as to have eaten the flesh of a man of Simorgya."

"Nevertheless," said the Mouser in a small, flat voice, "I'd throw the ring away."

Fafhrd chuckled. His imagination was stirred, so that he saw the fabled land of Simorgya, not lightless and covered with great drifts of sea ooze, but as it once might have been, alive with ancient industry and commerce, strong with alien wizardry. Then the picture changed and he saw a long, narrow, twenty-oared galley, such as his people made, driving ahead into a stormy sea. There was the glint of gold and steel about the captain on the poop, and the muscles of the steersman cracked as he strained at the steering oar. The faces of the warrior-rowers were exultantly eager, dominated by the urge to rape the unknown. The whole ship was like a thirsty spearhead. He marveled at the vividness of the picture. Old longings vibrated faintly in his flesh. He felt the ring, ran his finger over the carving of the ship and monster, and again chuckled.

The Mouser fetched a stubby, heavy-wicked candle from the cabin and fixed it in a small horn lantern that was proof against wind. Hanging at the stern it pushed back the darkness a little, not much. Until midnight it was the Mouser's watch. After a while Fafhrd slumbered.

He awoke with the feeling that the weather had changed and quick work was wanted. The Mouser was calling him. The sloop was heeled over so that the starboard pontoon rode the crests of the waves. There was chilly spray in the wind. The lantern swung wildly. Only astern were stars visible. The Mouser brought the sloop into the wind, and Fafhrd took a triple reef in the sail, while waves hammered ta the bow, an occasional light crest breaking over.

When they were on their course again, he did not immediately join the Mouser, but stood wondering, for almost the first time, how the sloop would stand heavy seas. It was not the sort of boat he would have built in his northern homeland, but it was the best that could be gotten under the circumstances. He had caulked and tarred it meticulously, replaced any wood that looked too weak, substituted a triangular sail for the square one, and increased the height of the bow a trifle. To offset a tendency to capsize, he had added outriggers a little astern of the mast, getting the strongest, truest wood for the long cross

pieces, carefully steaming them into the proper shape. It was a good job, he knew, but that didn't change the fact that the boat had a clumsy skeleton and many hidden weaknesses. He sniffed the raw, salt air and peered to windward through narrowed eyes, trying to gauge the weather. The Mouser was saying something, he realized, and he turned his head to listen.

"Throw the ring away before she blows a hurricane!"

He smiled and made a wide gesture that meant "No." Then he turned back to gaze at the wild glimmering chaos of darkness and waves to windward. Thoughts of the boat and the weather dropped away, and he was content to drink in the awesome, age-old scene, swaying to keep balance, feeling each movement of the boat and at the same time sensing, almost as if it were something akin to himself, the godless force of the elements.

It was then the thing happened that took away his power to react and held him, as it were, in a spell. Out of the surging wall of darkness emerged the dragon-headed prow of a galley. He saw the black wood of the sides, the light wood of the oars, the glint of wet metal. It was so like the ship of his imaginings that he was struck dumb with wonder as to whether it was only another vision, or whether he had had a foreglimpse of it by second sight, or whether he had actually summoned it across the deeps by his thoughts. It loomed higher, higher, higher.

The Mouser cried out and pushed over the tiller, his body arched with the mighty effort. Almost too late the sloop came out of the path of the dragon-headed prow. And still Fafhrd stared as at an apparition. He did not hear the Mouser's warning shout as the sloop's sail filled from the other side and slammed across with a rush. The boom caught him in the back of the knees and hurled him outward, but not into the sea, for his feet found the narrow pontoon and he balanced there precariously. In that instant an oar of the galley swung down at him and he toppled sideways, instinctively grasping the blade as he fell. The sea drenched him and wrenched at him, but he clung

tightly and began to pull himself up the oar, hand over hand.

His legs were numb from the blow; he feared he would be unable to swim. And he was still bewitched by what he saw. For the moment he forgot the Mouser and the sloop entirely. He shook off the greedy waves, reached the side of the galley, caught hold of the oarhole. Then he looked back and saw, in a kind of stupid surprise, the disappearing stern of the sloop and the Mouser's gray-capped face, revealed by a close swing of the lantern, staring at him in blank helplessness.

What happened next ended whatever spell had held him. A hand that carried steel struck. He twisted to one side and caught the wrist, then grasped the side of the galley, got his foot in the oarhole, on top of the oar, and heaved. The man dropped the knife too late, clawed at the side, failed to get a secure hold, and was dragged overboard, spitting, and snapping his jaws in futile panic. Fafhrd, instinctively taking the offensive, sprang down onto the oarbench, which was the last of ten and half under the poop deck. His questioning eyes spied a rack of swords and he whirled one out, menacing the two shadowy figures hastening toward him, one from the forward oarbenches, one from the poop. They attacked with a rush, but silently, which was strange. The spray-wet weapons sparkled as they clashed.

Fafhrd fought warily, on guard for a blow from above, timing his lunges to the roll of the galley. He dodged a swashing blow and parried an unexpected bankhanded slash from the same weapon. Stale, sour wine fumes puffed into his face. Someone dragged out an oar and thrust it like a huge lance; it came between Fafhrd and the two swordsmen, crashing heavily into the sword rack. Fafhrd glimpsed a ratlike, beadyeyed, toothy face peering up at him from the deeper darkness under the poop. One of the swordsmen lunged wildly, slipped and fell. The other gave ground, then gathered himself for a rush. But he paused with his sword in midair, looking over Fafhrd's head as if

at a new adversary. The crest of a great wave struck him in the chest, obscuring him.

Fafhrd felt the weight of the water on his shoulders and clutched at the poop for support. The deck was at a perilous tilt. Water gushed up through the opposite oarholes. In the confusion, he realized, the galley had gotten into the troughs and was beginning to take the seas broadside. She wasn't built to stand that. He vaulted up out of another breaking wave onto the poop and added his strength to that of the lone struggling steersman. Togethey they strained at the great oar, which seemed to be set in stone instead of water. Inch by inch they fought their way across the narrow deck. None the less, the galley seemed doomed.

Then something—a momentary lessening of the wind and waves or perhaps a lucky pull by a forward oarsman—decided the issue. As slowly and laboriously as a waterlogged hulk the galley lifted and began to edge back into the proper course. Fafhrd and steersman strained prodigiously to hold each foot gained. Only when the galley was riding safe before the wind did they look up. Fafhrd saw two swords leveled steadily at his chest. He calculated his chances and did not move.

It was not easy to believe that fire had been preserved through that tremendous wetting, but one of them nevertheless carried a sputtering tarry torch. By its light Fafhrd saw that they were northerners akin to himself. Big rawboned fellows, so blond they seemed almost to lack eyebrows. They wore metal-studded war gear and close-fitting bronze helmets. Their expressions were frozen halfway between a glare and a grin. Again he smelled stale wine. His glance strayed forward. Three oarsmen were bailing with bucket and hand crane.

Somebody was striding toward the poop—the leader, if one could guess from gold and jewels and an air of assurance. He sprang up the short ladder, his limbs supple as a cat's. He seemed younger than the rest and his features were almost delicate. Fine, silky blond hair was plastered wetly against his cheeks. But there was feline rapacity in his tight, smiling lips, and there was craziness in his jewel-

blue eyes. Fafhrd hardened his own face against their inspection. One question kept nagging him. Why, even at the height of the confusion, had there been no cries, no shouts, no bellowed orders? Since he had come aboard, there had not been a word uttered.

The young leader seemed to come to a conclusion about Fafhrd, for his thin smile widened a trifle and he motioned toward the oar deck. Then Fafhrd broke silence and said in a voice that sounded unnatural and hoarse. "What do you intend? Weight well the fact that I saved your ship."

He tensed himself, noting with some satisfaction that the steersman stayed close beside him, as if their shared task had forged a bond between them. The smile left the leader's face. He laid his finger to his lips and then impatiently repeated his first gesture. This time Fafhrd understood. He was to replace the oarsman he had pulled overboard. He could not but admit there was a certain ironic justice to the idea. It was borne in on him that swift death would be his lot if he renewed the fight at such a disadvantage; slow death, if he leaped overboard in the mad hope of finding the sloop in the howling, heaving darkness. The arms holding the swords became taut. He curtly nodded his head in submission. At least they were his own people.

With his first feel of the heavy, rebellious water against the blade of his oar, a new feeling took hold of Fafhrd—a feeling with which he was not unfamiliar. He seemed to become part of the ship, to share its purposes, whatever they might be. It was the age-old spirit of the oar-bench. When his muscles had warmed to the task and his nerves became accustomed to the rhythm, he found himself stealing glances at the men around him, as if he had known them before; trying to penetrate and share the eager, set look on their faces.

Something huddled in many folds of ragged cloth shuffled out from the little cabin far back under the poop and held a leather flask to the lips of the opposite oarsman. The creature looked absurdly squat among such tall men. When it turned, Fafhrd recognized the beady eyes he had glimpsed before, and as it came nearer, distinguished under

the heavy cowl the wrinkled, subtle, ochre face of an aged Mingol.

"So you're the new one," the Mingol croaked jeeringly. "I liked your swordplay. Drink deep now, for Lavas Laerk may decide to sacrifice you to the sea gods before morning. But, mind you, don't dribble any."

Fafhrd sucked greedily, then almost coughed and spat when a rush of strong wine seared his throat. After a while the Mingol jerked the flask away.

"Now you know what Lavas Laerk feeds his oarsmen. There are few crews in this world or the next that row on wine." He chuckled, then said, "But you're wondering why I talk aloud. Well, young Lavas Laerk may put a vow of silence on all his men, but he may not do the same to me, who am only a slave. For I tend the fire—how carefully you know—and serve out the wine and cook the meat, and recite incantations for the good of the ship. There are certain things that neither Lavas Laerk nor any other man, nor any other demon, may demand of me."

"But what does Lavas Laerk——"

The Mingol's leathery palm clapped over Fafhrd's mouth and shut off the whispered question.

"Sh! Do you care so little for life? Remember, you are Lavas Laerk's henchman. But I will tell you what you would know." He sat down on the wet bench beside Fafhrd, looking like a bundle of black rags someone had dropped there. "Lavas Laerk has sworn to raid far Simorgya, and he has put a vow of silence upon himself and his men until they sight the coast. Sh! Sh! I know they say Simorgya is under the waves, or that there never was such a place. But Lavas Laerk swore a great oath before his mother, whom he hates worse than he hates his friends, and he killed a man who thought to question his decision. So it's Simorgya we seek, if only to steal pearls from the oysters and ravish the fishes. Lean down and row more easily for a space, and I will tell you a secret that's no secret and make a prophecy that's no prophecy." He crowded closer. "Lavas Laerk hates all men who are sober, for he believes—and rightly—that only drunken men are even a

little like himself. Tonight the crew will row well, though it's a day since they've had meat. Tonight the wine will make them see at least the glow of the visions that Lavas Laerk sees. But next morning there will be aching backs and sick guts and pain-hammered skulls. And then there will be mutiny and not even Lavas Laerk's madness will save him."

Fafhrd wondered why the Mingol shuddered, coughed weakly and made a gargling sound. He reached over and a warm fluid drenched his naked hand. Then Lavas Laerk pulled his dirk from the Mingol's neck and the Mingol rolled forward off the bench.

No word was spoken, but knowledge that some abominable deed had been committed passed from oarsman to oarsman through the stormy darkness until it reached the bench in the bow. Then gradually there began a kind of pent-up commotion, which increased markedly as there slowly percolated forward an awareness of the specially heinous nature of the deed—the murder of the slave who tended the fire and whose magical powers, though often scoffed at, were entwined with the destiny of the ship itself. Still no completely intelligible words, but low grunts and snarls and mutterings, the scrape of oars being drawn in and rested, a growing murmur in which consternation and fear and anger were mixed, and which washed back and forth between bow and poop like a wave in a tub. Half caught up by it, Fafhrd readied himself for a spring, though whether at the apprehensively motionless figure of Lavas Laerk or back toward the comparative safety of the poop cabin, he could not say. Certainly Lavas Laerk was doomed; or rather he would have been doomed, had not the steersman screamed from the poop in a great shaky voice, "Land ho! Simorgya! Simorgya!"

That wild cry, like a clawed skeletal hand, seized upon the agitation of the crew and wrenched it to an almost unbearable climax. A shuddering inhalation of breath swept the ship. Then came shouts of wonder, cries of fear, curses that were half prayers. Two oarsmen started to fight together for no other reason than that the sudden, painful

upgush of feeling demanded action of some sort, any sort. Another pushed wildly at his oar, screeching at the rest to follow his example and reverse the galley's course and so escape. Fafhrd vaulted upon his bench and stared ahead.

It loomed up vast as a mountain and perilously close. A great black blot vaguely outlined by the lesser darkness of the night, partly obscured by trailings of mist and scud, yet showing in various places and at varying distances squares of dim light which by their regular arrangement could be nothing but windows. And with each pounding heartbeat the roar of surf and the thunder of breaking waves grew louder.

All at once it was upon them. Fafhrd saw a great overhanging crag slide by, so close it snapped the last oar on the opposite side. As the galley lifted on a wave he looked awestruck into three windows in the crag—if it was a crag and not a half submerged tower—but saw nothing save a ghostly yellow luminescence. Then he heard Lavas Laerk bellowing commands in a harsh, high-pitched voice. A few of the men worked frantically at the oars, but it was too late for that, although the galley seemed to have gotten behind some protecting wall of rock into slightly calmer waters. A terrible rasping noise went the length of the keel. Timbers groaned and cracked. A last wave lifted them and a great grinding crash sent men reeling and tumbling. Then the galley stopped moving altogether and the only sound was the roar of the surf, until Lavas Laerk cried exultantly, "Serve out weapons and wine! Make ready for a raid!"

The words seemed incredible in this more than dangerous situation, with the galley broken beyond repair, gutted by the rocks. Yet the men rallied and seemed even to catch something of the wild eagerness of their master, who had proven to them that the world was no more sane than he.

Fafhrd watched them fetch torch after torch from the poop cabin, until the whole stern of the wreck smoked and flared. He watched them snatch and suck at the wineskins and heft the swords and dirks given out, comparing them and cleaving at the air to get the feel. Then some of them grabbed hold of him and hustled him to the sword rack,

saying, "Here, Red Hair, you must have a weapon, too." Fafhrd went along unresisting, yet he felt that something would prevent them from arming one who so late had been their enemy. And he was right in this, for Lavas Laerk stopped the lieutenant who was about to hand Fafhrd a sword, and stared with growing intentness at Fafhrd's left hand.

Puzzled, Fafhrd raised it, and Lavas Laerk cried, "Seize him!" and at the same instant jerked something from Fafhrd's middle finger. Then Fafhrd remembered. It was the ring.

"There can be no doubt about the workmanship," said Lavas Laerk, peering cunningly at Fafhrd, his bright blue eyes giving the impression of being out of focus or slightly crossed. "This man is a Simorgyan spy, or perhaps a Simorgyan demon who has taken the form of a northerner to allay our suspicions. He climbed out of the sea in the teeth of a roaring storm, did he not? What man among you saw any boat?"

"I saw a boat," ventured the steersman hurriedly. "A queer sloop with triangular sail——" But Lavas Laerk shut him up with a sidewise glance.

Fafhrd felt the point of a dirk at his back and checked his tightening muscles.

"Shall we kill him?" The question came from close behind Fafhrd's ear.

Lavas Laerk smiled crookedly up at the darkness and paused, as if listening to the advice of some invisible storm wraith. Then he shook his head. "Let him live for the present. He can show us where loot is hid. Guard him with naked swords."

Whereupon they all left the galley, clambering down ropes hung from the prow onto rocks which the surf alternately covered and uncovered. One or two laughed and jumped. A dropped torch hissed out in the brine. There was much shouting. Someone began to sing in a drunken voice that had an edge like a rusty knife. Then Lavas Laerk got them into a sort of order and they marched away, half of them carrying torches, a few still hugging wine-

skins, sliding and slipping, cursing the sharp rocks and barnacles which cut them when they fell, hurling exaggerated threats at the darkness ahead, where strange windows glowed. Behind them the long galley lay like a dead beetle, the oars sprawled out all askew from the ports.

They had marched for some little distance, and the sound of the breakers was less thunderous, when their torchlight helped reveal a portal in a great wall of black rock that might or might not have been a castle rather than a caverned cliff. The portal was square and high as an oar. Three worn stone steps drifted with wet sand led up to it. Dimly they could discern on the pillars, and on the heavy lintel overhead, carvings partly obliterated by slime and incrustations of some sort, but unmistakably Simorgyan in their obscure symbolism.

The crew, staring silently now, drew closer together. The ragged procession became a tight knot. Then Lavas Laerk called mockingly, "Where are your guards, Simorgya? Where are your fighting men?" and walked straight up the stone steps. After a moment of uncertainty, the knot broke and the men followed him.

On the massive threshold Fafhrd involuntarily halted, dumbstruck by realization of the source of the faint yellow light he had earlier noticed in the high windows. For the source was everywhere: ceiling, walls, and slimy floor all glowed with a wavering phosphorescence. Even the carvings glimmered. Mixed awe and repugnance gripped him. But the men pressed around and against him, and carried him forward. Wine and leadership had dulled their sensibilities and as they strode down the long corridor they seemed little aware of the abysmal scene.

At first some held their weapons ready to meet a possible foray or ambush, but soon they lowered them negligently, and even sucked at the wineskins and jested. A hulking oarsman, whose blond beard was patched with yellow scud from the surf, struck up a chanty and others joined in, until the dank walls roared. Deeper and deeper they penetrated into the cave or castle, along the wide, winding, ooze-carpeted corridor.

Fafhrd was carried along by a current. When he moved too slowly, the others jostled him and he quickened his pace, but it was all involuntary. Only his eyes responded to his will, turning from side to side, drinking in details with fearful curiosity. The endless series of vague carvings, wherein sea monsters and unwholesome manlike figures and vaguely anthropomorphic giant skates or rays seemed to come alive and stir as the phosphorescence fluctuated. A group of highest windows or openings of some sort, from which dark slippery weeds trailed down. The pools of water here and there. The still-alive, gasping fish which the others trod or kicked aside. The clumps of bearded shells clinging to the corners. The impression of things scuttling out of the way ahead. Louder and louder the thought drummed in his skull: Surely the others must realize where they were. Surely they must know the phosphorescence was that of the sea. Surely they must know that this was the retreat of the more secret creatures of the deep. Surely, surely they must know that Simorgya had indeed sunk under the sea and only risen up yesterday—or yester-hour.

But on they marched after Lavas Laerk, and still sang and shouted and swilled wine in quick gulps, throwing back their heads and lifting up the sacks as they strode. And Fafhrd could not speak. His shoulder muscles were contracted as if the weight of the sea were already pressing them down. His mind was engulfed and oppressed by the ominous presence of sunken Simorgya. Memories of the legends. Thoughts of the black centuries during which sea life had slowly crept and wriggled and swum through the mazes of rooms and corridors until it had a lair in every crack and cranny and Simorgya was one with the mysteries of the ocean. In a deep grotto that opened on the corridor he made out a thick table of stone, with a great stone chair behind it; and though he could not be sure, he thought he distinguished an octopus shape slouched there in a travesty of a human occupant, tentacles coiling the chair, unblinking eyes staring glisteningly.

Gradually the flare of the smokey torches paled, as the

phosphorescence grew stronger. And when the men broke off singing, the sound of the surf was no longer audible.

Then Lavas Laerk, from around a sharp turn in the corridor, uttered a triumphant cry. The others hastened after, stumbling, lurching, calling out eagerly.

"Oh, Simorgya!" cried Lavas Laerk, "we have found your treasure house!"

The room in which the corridor ended was equare and considerably lower-ceilinged than the corridor. Standing here and there were a number of black, soggy-looking, heavily-bound chests. The stuff underfoot was muckier. There were more pools of water. The phosphorescence was stronger.

The blond-bearded oarsman leaped ahead as the others hesitated. He wrenched at the cover of the nearest chest. A corner came away in his hands, the wood soft as cheese, the seeming metal a black, smeary ooze. He grasped at it again and pulled off most of the top, revealing a layer of dully-gleaming gold and slime-misted gems. Over that jeweled surface a crablike creature scuttled, escaping through a hole in the back.

With a great, greedy shout, the others rushed at the chests, jerking, gouging, even smiting with their swords at the spongy wood. Two, fighting as to which should break open a chest, fell against it and it went to pieces under them, leaving them struggling in jewels and muck.

All this while Lavas Laerk stood on the same spot from which he had uttered his first taunting cry. To Fafhrd, who stood forgotten beside him, it seemed that Lavas Laerk was distraught that his quest should come to any end, that Lavas Laerk was desperately searching for something further, something more than jewels and gold to sate his mad willfulness. Then he noted that Lavas Laerk was looking at something intently—a square, slime-filmed, but apparently golden door across the room from the mouth of the corridor; upon it was the carving of some strange, undulant blanketlike sea monster. He heard Lavas Laerk laugh throatily and watched him stride unswervingly toward the door. He saw that Lavas Laerk had something in

his hand. With a shock of surprise he recognized it as the ring Lavas Laerk had taken from him. He saw Lavas Laerk shove at the door without budging it. He saw Lavas Laerk fumble with the ring and fit the key part into the golden door and turn it. He saw the door give a little to Lavas Laerk's next push.

Then he realized—and the realization came with an impact like a rushing wall of water—that nothing had happened accidentally, that everything from the moment his arrow struck the fish, had been intended by someone or something—something that wanted a door unlocked—and he turned and fled down the corridor as if a tidal wave were sucking at his heels.

The corridor, without torchlight, was pale and shifty as a nightmare. The phosphorescence seemed to crawl as if alive, revealing previously unspied creatures in every niche. Fafhrd stumbled, sprawled at full length, raced on. His fastest bursts of speed seemed slow as in a bad dream. He tried to look only ahead, but still glimpsed from the corners of his eyes every detail he had seen before: the trailing weeds, the monstrous carvings, the bearded shells, the sombrely staring octopus eyes. He noted without surprise that his feet and body glowed wherever the slime had splashed or smeared. He saw a small square of darkness in the omnipresent phosphorescence and sprinted toward it. It grew in size. It was the cavern's portal. He plunged across the threshold into the night. He heard a voice calling his name.

It was the Gray Mouser's voice. It came from the opposite direction to the wrecked galley. He ran towards it across treacherous ledges. Starlight, now come back, showed a black gulf before his feet. He leaped, landed with a shaking impact on another rock surface, dashed forward without falling. He saw the top of a mast above an edge of darkness and almost bowled over the small figure that was staring raptly in the direction from which he had just fled. The Mouser seized him by the shoulder, dragged him to the edge, pulled him over. They clove the water together and swam out to the sloop anchored in the rock-sheltered

lee. The Mouser started to heave at the anchor but Fafhrd slashed the line with a knife snatched from the Mouser's belt and jerked up the sail in swift, swishing rushes.

Slowly the sloop began to move. Gradually the ripples became wavelets, the wavelets became smacking waves. Then they slipped past a black, foam-edged sword of rock and were in the open sea. Still Fafhrd did not speak, but crowded on all canvas and did all else possible to coax speed from the storm-battered sloop. Resigned to mystification, the Mouser helped him.

They had not been long underway when the blow fell. The Mouser, looking sternward, gave a hoarse incredulous cry. The wave swiftly overtaking them was higher than the mast. And something was sucking the sloop back. The Mouser raised his arms shieldingly. Then the sloop began to climb; up, up, up until it reached the top, overbalanced, and plummeted down on the opposite side. The first wave was followed by a second and a third, and a fourth, each almost as high. A larger boat would surely have been swamped. Finally the waves gave way to a choppy, foaming, unpredictable chaos, in which every ounce of effort and a thousand quick decisions were needed to keep the sloop afloat.

When the pale foredawn came, they were back on the homeward course again, a small improvised sail taking the place of the one ripped in the aftermath of the storm, enough water bailed from the hold to make the sloop seaworthy. Fafhrd, dazedly watching for the sunrise, felt weak as a woman. He only half heard the Mouser tell, in snatches, of how he had lost the galley in the storm, but followed what he guessed to be its general course until the storm cleared, and had sighted the strange island and landed there, mistakenly believing it to be the galley's home port.

The Mouser then brought thin, bitter wine and salt fish, but Fafhrd pushed them away and said, "One thing I must know. I never looked back. You were staring earnestly at something behind me. What was it?"

The Mouser shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. The

distance was too great and the light was queer. What I thought I saw was rather foolish. I'd have given a good deal to have been closer." He frowned, shrugged his shoulders again. "Well, what I thought I saw was this. A crowd of men wearing big black cloaks—they looked like northerners—came rushing out of an opening of some sort. There was something odd about them: the light by which I saw them didn't seem to have any source. Then they waved the big black cloaks around as if they were fighting with them or doing some sort of dance. . . . I told you it was very foolish . . . and then they got down on their hands and knees and covered themselves up with the cloaks and crawled back into the place from which they had come. Now tell me I'm a liar."

Fafhrd shook his head. "Only those weren't cloaks," he said.

The Mouser began to sense that there was much more to it than he had even guessed. "What were they then?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Fafhrd.

"But then what was the place, I mean the island that almost sucked us down when it sank?"

"Simorgya," said Fafhrd and lifted his head and began to grin in a cruel, chilly, wild-eyed way that took the Mouser aback. "Simorgya," repeated Fafhrd, and pulled himself to the side of the boat and glared down at the rushing water. "Simorgya. And now it's sunk again. And may it soak there forever and rot in its own corruption, till all's muck!" He trembled spasmodically with the passion of his curse, then sank back. Along the rim of the east a ruddy smudge began to show.

North of the Eight Cities and even Illik-Ving, the Trollsteps mount to the freezing plateau-land of the Cold Waste. Northwest the Cold Waste climbs higher yet to the Mountains of the Ice Gnomes and the Bones of the Old Ones. Thence the crags drop precipitously to the northern waters of the Outer Sea, forming a grim icy coast from No-ombrulsk to the Claws. A formidable path for any travelers to attempt, although the Cold Waste was Fafhrd's home.

the seven black priests

EYES like red lava peered from a face black as dead lava down the sheer mountainside at the snowy ledge that narrowed off into chilly darkness barely touched by dawn. The black priest's heart pounded its rib-cage. Never in his life or his priest-father's before him had intruders come by this narrow way that led from the Outer Sea across the mountains known as the Bones of the Old Ones. Never in three long returns of the Year of Monsters, never in four sailings of the ship to tropic Klesh to get them wives, had any but he and his fellow-priests trod the way below. Yet he had always guarded it as faithfully and warily as if it were the nightly assault-route of blasphemy-bent spearmen and bowmen.

There it came again, and unmistakably!—the rumble of singing. To judge from the tone, the man must have a chest like a bear's. As if he had drilled for this nightly (and he had) the black priest laid aside his conical hat and stepped out of his fur-lined shoes and slipped off his fur-lined robe, revealing his skinny-limbed, sag-bellied, well-greased frame.

Moving back in the stony niche, he selected a narrow stick from a closely-shielded fire and laid it across a pit in the rock. Its unsputtering flame revealed that the pit was filled to a hand's-breath of the top with a powder that glittered like smashed jewels. He judged it would take some

thirty slow breaths for the stick to burn through at the middle.

He silently returned to the edge of the niche, which was the height of three tall men—seven times his own height—above the snowy ledge. And now, far along that ledge, he could dimly distinguish a figure—no, two. He drew a long knife from his loin-cloth and, crouching forward, poised himself on hands and toes. He breathed a prayer to his strange and improbable god. Somewhere above, ice or rocks creaked and snapped faintly, as if the mountain too were flexing its muscles in murderous anticipation.

"Give us the next verse, Fafhrd," merrily called the foremost of the two snow-treaders. "You've had thirty paces to compose it, and our adventure took no longer. Or is the poetic hoot-owl frozen at last in your throat?"

The Mouser grinning as he strode along with seeming recklessness, the sword Scalpel swinging at his side. His high-collared gray cloak and hood, pulled close around him, shadowed his swart features but could not conceal their impudence.

Fafhrd's garments, salvaged from their sloop wrecked on the chilly coast, were all wools and furs. A great golden clasp gleamed dully on his chest and a golden band, tilted awry, confined his snarled reddish hair. His white-skinned face, with gray eyes wide set, had a calm bold look to it, though the brow was furrowed in thought. From over his right shoulder protruded a bow, while from over his left shoulder gleamed the sapphire eyes of a brazen dragon-head that was the pommel of a longsword slung on his back.

His brow cleared, and as if some more genial mountain than the frozen one they traveled along had given tongue, he sang:

"Oh, Lavas Laerk
Had a face like a dirk
And of swordsmen twenty-and-three,
And his greased black ship
Through the waves did slip—
'Twas the sleekest craft at sea;

Yet it helped him nought
When he was caught
By magic, the Mouser, and me.
And now he feeds fishes
The daintiest dishes,
But—

The words broke off and the Gray Mouser heard the hissing scuff of leather on snow. Whirling around, he saw Fafhrd hurtle over the side of the cliff and he had a moment to wonder whether the huge northerner, maddened by his own doggerel, had decided to illustrate dramatically Lavas Laerk's plunge to the bottomless deeps.

The next moment Fafhrd caught himself with elbows and hands on the margin of the ledge. Simultaneously, a black and gleaming form hit the spot he had just desperately vacated, broke its fall with bent arms and hunched shoulders, spun over in a somersault, and lunged at the Mouser with a knife that flashed like a splinter of the moon. The knife was about to take the Mouser in the belly when Fafhrd, supporting his weight on one forearm, twitched the attacker back by an ankle. At this the small black one hissed low and horribly, turned again, and lunged at Fafhrd. But now the Mouser was roused at last from the shocked daze that he assured himself could never grip him in a less hatefully cold country. He dove forward at the small black one, diverting his thrust—there were sparks as the weapon struck stone within a finger's-width of Fafhrd's arm—and skidding his greased form off the ledge beyond Fafhrd. The small black one swooped out of sight as silently as a bat.

Fafhrd, dangling his great frame over the abyss, finished his verse:

But the daintiest dish is he.

"Hush, Fafhrd," the Mouser hissed, stooping as he listened intently. "I think I heard him hit."

Fafhrd absentmindedly eased himself up to a seat. "Not

if that chasm is half as deep as the last time we saw its bottom, you didn't," he assured his comrade.

"But what was he?" the Mouser asked frowningly. "He looked like a man of Klesh."

"Yes, with the jungle of Klesh as far from here as the moon," Fafhrd reminded him with a chuckle. "Some maddened hermit frostbitten black, no doubt. There are strange skulkers in these little hills, they say."

The Mouser peered up the dizzy mile-high cliff and spotted the nearby niche. "I wonder if there are more of him?" he questioned uneasily.

"Madmen commonly go alone," Fafhrd asserted, getting up. "Come, small nagger, we'd best be on our way if you want a hot breakfast. If the old tales are true, we should be reaching the Cold Waste by sun-up—and there we'll find a little wood at least."

At that instant a great glow sprang from the niche from which the small attacker had dropped. It pulsed, turning from violet to green to yellow to red.

"What makes that?" Fafhrd mused, his interest roused at last. "The old tales say nothing of firevents in the Bones of the Old Ones. Now if I were to give you a boost, Mouser, I think you could reach that knob and then make your own way——"

"Oh no," the Mouser interrupted, tugging at the big man and silently cursing himself for starting the question-asking. "I want my breakfast cooked over more wholesome flames. And I would be well away from here before other eyes see the glow."

"None will see it, small dodger of mysteries," Fafhrd said chucklingly, letting himself be urged away along the path. "Look, even now it dies."

But at least one other eye had seen the pulsing glow—an eye as large as a squid's and bright as the Dog Star.

"Ha, Fafhrd!" cried the Gray Mouser gaily some hours later in the full-broken dawn, "There's an omen to warm our frozen hearts! A green hill winks at us frosty men—gives us the glad eye like a malachite-smeared dusky courtesan of Klesh!"

"She's as hot as a courtesan of Klesh, too," the huge Northerner supplemented, rounding the brown crag's bulging shoulder in his turn, "for she's melted all the snow."

It was true. Although the far horizon shone white and green with the snows and glacial ice of the Cold Waste, the saucer-like depression in the foreground held a small unfrozen lake. And while the air was still chilly around them, so that their breath drifted away in small white clouds, the brown ledge they trod was bare.

Up from the nearer shore of the lake rose the hill to which the Mouser had referred, the hill from which one star-small point still reflected the new-risen sun's rays at them blindingly.

"That is, if it is a hill," Fafhrd added softly. "And in any case, whether a courtesan of Klesh or hill, she has several faces."

The point was well taken. The hill's green flanks were formed of crags and hummocks which the imagination could shape into monstrous faces—all the eyes closed save the one that twinkled at them. The faces melted downward like wax into huge stony rivulets—or might they be elephantine trunks?—that plunged into the unruffled acid-seeming water. Here and there among the green were patches of dark red rock that might be blood, or mouths. Clashing nastily in color, the hill's rounded summit seemed to be composed of a fleshily pink marble. It too persisted in resembling a face—that of a sleeping ogre. It was crossed by a stretch of vividly red rock that might be the ogre's lips. From a slit in the red rock, a faint vapor rose.

The hill had more than a volcanic look. It seemed like an upwelling from a more savage, primal, fiercer consciousness than any that even Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser knew, an upwelling frozen in the act of invading a younger, weaker world—frozen yet eternally watchful and waiting and yearning.

And then the illusion was gone—or four-faces-out-of-five gone and the fifth wavering. The hill was just a hill again —an odd volcanic freak of the Cold Waste—a green hill with a glitter.

Fafhrd let out a gusty sigh. He surveyed the farther shore of the lake. It was hillocky and matted with a dark vegetation that unpleasantly resembled fur. At one point there rose from it a stubby pillar of rock almost like an altar. Beyond the hairy bushes, which were here and there flecked with red-leafed ones, stretched the ice and snow, broken only occasionally by great rocks and rare clumps of dwarfed trees.

But something else was foremost in the Mouser's thoughts.

"The eye, Fafhrd. The glad, glittering eye!" he whispered, dropping his voice as though they were in a crowded street and some informer or rival thief might overhear. "Only once before have I seen such a gleam, and that was by moonlight, across a king's treasure chamber. That time I did not come away with a huge diamond. A guardian serpent prevented. I killed the wriggler, but its hiss brought other guards.

"But this time there's only a little hill to climb. And if at this distance the gem gleams so bright, Fafhrd . . ." his hand dropped and gripped his companion's leg, at the sensitive point just above the knee, for emphasis. ". . . think how big!"

The northerner, frowning faintly at the violent squeeze as well as at his doubts and misgivings, nevertheless sucked an icy breath in appreciative greed.

"And we poor shipwrecked marauders," continued the Mouser raptly "will be able to tell the gaping and envious thieves of Lankhmar that we not only crossed the Bones of the Old Ones, but picked them on the way."

And he went skipping gaily down the skimpy ledge that merged into the narrow, lake-edged, rocky saddle that joined this greater mountain with the green one. Fafhrd followed more slowly, gazing steadily at the green hill, waiting for it to turn back into faces again, or to turn to no faces at all. It did neither. It occurred to him that it might have been partly shaped by human hands, and after that, the notion of a diamond-eyed idol seemed less implausible. At the far end of the saddle, just at the base of

the green hill, he caught up with the Mouser, who was studying a flat, dark rock covered with gashes which a moment's glance told Fafhrd must be artificial.

"The ruins of tropic Klesh!" the Northerner muttered. "What should such hieroglyphs be doing so far from their jungle?"

"Chiseled, no doubt, by some hermit frostbitten black, whose madness taught him the Kleshic language," the Mouser observed sardonically. "Or have you already forgotten last night's knifer?"

Fafhrd shook his head curtly. Together they pored over the deep-chopped letters, bringing to bear knowledge gained from the perusing of ancient treasure-maps and the deciphering of code-messages carried by intercepted spies.

"The seven black . . ." Fafhrd read laboriously.

". . . priests," the Mouser finished for him. "They're in it, whoever they may be. And a god or beast or devil—that writhing hieroglyph means any one of the three, depending on the surrounding words, which I don't understand. It's very ancient writing. And the seven black priests are to serve the writhing hieroglyph, or to bind it—again either might be meant, or both."

"And so long as the priesthood endures," Fafhrd took up, "that long will the god-beast-devil lie quietly . . . or sleep . . . or stay dead . . . or not come up . . ."

Abruptly the Mouser bounded straight into the air, fanning his feet. "This rock is hot," he complained.

Fafhrd understood. Even through the thick walrus-soles of his boots he was beginning to feel the unnatural warmth.

"Hotter than the floor of hell," the Mouser observed, hopping first on one foot and then the other. "Well, what now, Fafhrd? Shall we go up, or not?"

Fafhrd answered him with a sudden shout of laughter. "You decided that, little man, long ago! Was it *I* who started to talk about huge diamonds?"

So up they went, choosing that point where a gigantic trunk, or tentacle, or melted chin strained from the encasing granite. It was not an easy climb, even at the beginning, for the green stone was everywhere rounded off,

showing no marks of chisel or ax—which rather dampened Fafhrd's vague theory that this was a hill half-formed by human-wielded tools.

Upward the two of them edged and strained, their breath blowing out in bigger white clouds although the rock was uncomfortably hot under their hands. After an inch-by-inch climb up a slippery surface, where hands and feet and elbows and knees and even toasted chin must all help, they stood at last on the lower lip of one of the green hill's mouths. Here it seemed their ascent must end, for the great cheek above was smooth and sloped outward a spear's length above them.

But Fafhrd took from the Mouser's back a rope that had once guyed the mast of their shipwrecked sloop, made a noose in it, and cast it up toward the forehead above, where a stubby horn or feeler projected. It caught and held. Fafhrd put his weight on it to test it, then looked inquiringly at his companion.

"What have you in mind?" the Mouser asked, clinging affectionately to the rock-face. "This whole climb begins to seem mere foolishness."

"But what of the jewel?" Fafhrd replied in pleasant mockery. "So big, Mouser, so big!"

"Likely just a bit of quartz," the Mouser said sourly. "I have lost my hunger for it."

"But as for me," Fafhrd cried, "I have only now worked up a good appetite."

And he swung out into emptiness, around the green cheek and into thin, brilliant sunlight.

It seemed to him as if the still lake and the green hill were rocking, instead of himself. He came to rest below the face's monstrously pouchy eyelid. He climbed up hand over hand, found good footing on the ledge that was the eyelid pouch, and twitched the end of the rope back to the Mouser, whom he could no longer see. On the third cast it did not swing back. He squatted on the ledge, bracing himself securely to guy the rope. It went tight in his hands. Very soon the Mouser stepped onto the ledge beside him.

The gayety was back in the small thief's face, but it was a fragile gayety, as though he wanted to get this done with quickly. They edged their way along the great eye-pouch until they were directly below the fancied pupil. It was rather above Fafhrd's head, but the Mouser, nimbly hitching himself up on Fafhrd's shoulders peered in readily.

Fafhrd, bracing himself against the green wall, waited impatiently. It seemed as if the Mouser would never speak. "Well?" he asked finally, when his shoulders had begun to ache from the Mouser's weight.

"Oh, it's a diamond, all right." The Mouser sounded oddly uninterested. "Yes, it's big. My fingers can just about span it. And it's cut like a smooth sphere—a sort of diamond eye. But I don't know about getting it out. It's set very deep. Should I try? Don't bellow so, Fafhrd, you'll blow us both off! I suppose we might as well take it, since we've come so far. But it won't be easy. My knife can't . . . yes, it can! I thought it was rock around the gem. But it's tarry stuff. Squidgy. There! I'm coming down."

Fafhrd had a glimpse of something smooth, globular and dazzling, with an ugly, ragged, tarry circlet clinging to it. Then it seemed that someone flicked his elbow lightly. He looked down. Momentarily he had the strangest feeling of being in the green steamy jungle of Klesh. For protruding from the brown fur of his cloak was a wickedly barbed little dart, thickly smeared with a substance as black and tarry as that disfiguring the diamond eye.

He quickly dropped flat on the ledge, crying out to the Mouser to do the same. Then he carefully tugged loose the dart, finding to his relief that, although it had nicked the thick hide of his cloak beneath the fur, it had not touched flesh.

"I think I see him," called the Mouser, peering down cautiously over the protected ledge. "A little fellow with a very long blowgun and dressed in furs and a conical hat. Crouching there in those dark bushes across the lake. Black, I think, like our knifer last night. A Kleshian, I'd say, unless he's one more of your frostbitten hermits. Now he lifts the gun to his lips. Watch yourself!"

A second dart pinged against the rock above them, then dropped down close by Fafhrd's hand. He jerked it away sharply.

There was a whirring sound, ending in a muted snap. The Mouser had decided to get a blow in. It is not easy to swing a sling while lying prone on a ledge, but the Mouser's missile crackled into the furry bushes close to the black blowgunner, who immediately ducked out of sight.

It was easy enough then to decide on a plan of action, for few were available. While the Mouser raked the bushes across the lake with sling shots, Fafhrd went down the rope. Despite the Mouser's protection, he fervently prayed that his cloak be thick enough. He knew from experience that the darts of Klesh are nasty things. At irregular intervals came the whirr of the Mouser's casts, cheering him on.

Reaching the green hill's base, he strung his bow and called up to the Mouser that he was ready in his turn to cover the retreat. His eyes searched the furry cliffs across the lake, and twice when he saw movement he sent an arrow from his precious store of twenty. Then the Mouser was beside him and they were racing off along the hot mountain edge toward where the cryptically ancient glacial ice gleamed green. Often they looked back across the lake at the dubious furry bushes spotted here and there with blood-red ones, and twice or thrice they thought they saw movement in them—movement coming their way. Whenever this happened, they sent an arrow or a stone whirring, though with what effect they could not tell.

"The seven black priests—" Fafhrd muttered.

"The six," the Mouser corrected. "We killed one of them last night."

"Well, the six then," Fafhrd conceded. "They seem angry with us."

"As why shouldn't they be?" the Mouser demanded. "We stole their idol's only eye. Such an act annoys priests tremendously."

"It seemed to have more eyes than that one," Fafhrd asserted thoughtfully, "if only it had opened them."

"Thank Sheelba it didn't!" the Mouser hissed. "And 'ware that dart!"

Fafhrd hit the dirt—or rather the rock—instantly, and the black dart skirred on the ice ahead.

"I think they're unreasonably angry," Fafhrd asserted, scrambling to his feet.

"Priests always are," the Mouser said philosophically, with a sidewise shudder at the dart's black-crusted point.

"At any rate, we're rid of them," Fafhrd said with relief, as he and the Mouser loped onto the ice. The Mouser leered at him sardonically, but Fafhrd didn't notice.

All day they trudged rapidly across the green ice, seeking their way southward by the sun, which got hardly a hand's-breath above the horizon. Toward night the Mouser brought down two low-winging arctic birds with three casts of his sling, while Fafhrd's long-seeing eyes spied a black cave-mouth in an outcropping of rock under a great snowy slope. Luckily there was a clump of dwarfed trees, uprooted and killed by moving ice, near the cave's mouth, and soon the two adventurers were gnawing tough, close-grained, brown bird and watching the flickering little fire in the cave's entrance.

Fafhrd stretched hugely and said, "Farewell to all black priests! That's another bother done with." He reached out a large, long-fingered hand. "Mouser, let me see that glass eye you dug from the green hill."

The Mouser without comment reached into his pouch and handed Fafhrd the brilliant tar-circled globule. Fafhrd held it between his big hands and viewed it thoughtfully. The firelight shone through it and spread from it, highlighting the cave with red, baleful beams. Fafhrd stared unblinkingly at the gem, until the Mouser decided the big northerner must be blinded. The Mouser became very conscious of the great silence around them, broken only by the tiny but frequent crackling of the fire and the large but infrequent cracking of the ice outside. He felt weary to death, yet somehow couldn't consider sleep.

Finally Fafhrd said, in a faint unnatural voice, "The earth we walk on once lived—a great hot beast, breathing

out fire and spewing molten rock. Its constant yearning was to spit red-hot stuff at the stars. This was before all men."

"What's that?" the Mouser querried, stirring from his half-trance.

"Now men have come, the earth has gone to sleep," Fafhrd continued in the same hollow voice, not looking at the Mouser. "But in its dream it thinks of life, and stirs, and tries to shape itself into the form of men."

"What's that, Fafhrd?" the Mouser repeated uneasily. But Fafhrd answered him with sudden snores. The Mouser carefully teased the gem from his comrade's fingers. Its tarry rim was soft and slippery—repugnantly so, almost as if it were a kind of black tissue. The Mouser put the thing back in his pouch. A long time passed. Then the Mouser touched his companion's fur-clad shoulder. Fafhrd woke with a swift shudder. "What is it, Small One?" he demanded.

"Morning," the Mouser told him briefly, pointing over the ashes of the fire at the lightening sky.

As they stooped their way out of the cave, there was a faint roaring sound. Looking over the snow-rim and up the slope, Fafhrd saw hurtling down toward them a vast white globe that grew in size in the very brief time while he watched. He and the Mouser barely managed to dive back into the cavern before the earth shook and the noise became ear-splitting and everything went momentarily dark as the huge snowball thundered over the cave mouth. They both smelled the cold sour ashes blown into their faces from the dead fire by the globe's passing, and the Mouser coughed.

But Fafhrd instantly lunged out of the cave, swiftly stringing his great bow and fitting to it an arrow long as his arm. He sighted up the slope. At the slope's summit, tiny as bugs beyond the wickedly-barbed arrowhead, were a half-dozen conical-hatted figures, sharply silhouetted against the yellow-purple dawn.

They seemed busy as bugs too, fussing furiously with a white globe as tall as themselves.

Fafhrd let out half a breath, paused, and loosed his arrow. The tiny figures continued for several breaths to worry the stubborn globe. Then the one nearest it sprang convulsively and sprawled atop it. The globe began to roll down the slope, carrying the arrow-pierced black priest with it and gathering snow as it went. Soon he was hidden in the ever-thickening crust, but not before his flailing limbs had changed the globe's course, so that it missed the cave-mouth by a spear's length.

As the thundering died, the Mouser peered out cautiously.

"I shot the second avalanche aside," Fafhrd remarked casually. "Let's be moving."

The Mouser would have led the way around the hill—a long and winding course looking treacherous with snow and slippery rock, but Fafhrd said, "No, straight over the top, where their snowballs have cleared a path for us. They're much too cunning to expect us to take that path."

However, he kept an arrow nocked to his bow as they made their way up the rocky slope, and moved quite cautiously as they surmounted the naked crest. A white landscape green-spotted with glacial ice opened before them, but no dark specks moved up it and there were no hiding places nearby. Fafhrd unstrung his bow and laughed.

"They seemed to have scampered off," he said. "Doubtless they're running back to their little green hill to warm themselves. At any rate, we're rid of them."

"Yes, just as we were yesterday," the Mouser commented drily. "The fall of the knifer didn't seem to worry them at all, but doubtless they're scared witless because you put an arrow into another of their party."

"Well, at all events," Fafhrd said curtly, "Granting that there were seven black priests to begin with, there are now but five."

And he led the way down the other side of the hill, taking big reckless strides. The Mouser followed slowly, a stone rocking in his dangled sling and his gaze questing restlessly to every side. When they came to snow, he studied it, but there were no tracks as far as he could see

to either side. By the time he reached the foot of the hill, Fafhrd was a sling's cast ahead. To make up the distance, the Mouser began a soft-footed, easy lope, yet he did not desist from his watchfulness. His attention was attracted by a squat hummock of snow just ahead of Fafhrd. Shadows might have told him whether there was anything crouched behind it, but the yellow-purple haze hid the sun, so he kept on watching the hummock, meanwhile speeding up his pace. He reached the hummock and saw there was no one behind it almost at the moment he caught up with Fafhrd.

The hummock exploded into a scatter of snow-chunks and a black sag-bellied figure erupted out of it at Fafhrd, ebony arm extended for a knife-slash at the Northerner's neck. Almost simultaneously the Mouser lunged forward, whirling his sling backhanded. The stone, still in the leather loop, caught the slasher high in the face. The curved knife missed by inches. The slasher fell. Fafhrd looked around with mild interest.

The attacker's forehead was so deeply indented that there could be no question of his condition, yet the Mouser stared down at him for a long time. "A man of Klesh, all right," he said broodingly, "but fatter. Armored against the cold. Strange they should have come so far to serve their god." He looked up and without raising his arm from his side, sharply twirled his sling—much as a bravo might in some alley as a warning to skulkers.

"Four to go," he said and Fafhrd nodded slowly and soberly.

All day they trod across the Cold Waste—watchfully, but without further incident. A wind came up and the cold bit. The Mouser pulled in his hood so that it covered his mouth and nose, while even Fafhrd hugged his cloak closer around him.

As the sky was darkening to umber and indigo, Fafhrd suddenly stopped and strung his bow and let fly. For a moment the Mouser, who was a bit bothered by his comrade's bemused air, thought that the Northerner was shooting at mere snow. Then the snow leaped, kicking four grey

hoofs, and the Mouser realized Fafhrd had brought down white-furred meat. He licked his numb lips greedily as Fafhrd swiftly bled and gutted the animal and slung it over his shoulder.

A little way ahead was an outcropping of black rock. Fafhrd studied it for a moment, then took an ax from belt and struck the rock a careful blow with the back of the head. The Mouser eagerly gathered in the corner of his cloak the large and small chunks that flaked off. He could feel their oiliness and he felt warmed by the mere thought of the rich flame they would make.

Just beyond the outcropping was a low cliff and at its base a cave-mouth slightly sheltered by a tall rock perhaps two spears' lengths in front of it. The Mouser felt a great glow of anticipated content as he followed Fafhrd toward the inviting dark orifice. He had greatly feared, being numb with cold, aching with fatigue, famished, that they might have to camp out and content themselves with the bones of yesternight's birds. Now in an astonishingly short space they had found food, fuel, shelter. So wonderfully convenient . . .

And then, as Fafhrd rounded the sheltering rock and strode toward the cave-mouth, the thought came to the Mouser: "Much too convenient." Without further thought, he dropped the coal and sprang at his comrade, hurling the huge fellow flat on his face.

A dart hissed close over him and clicked faintly against the sheltering rock. Again without pause the Mouser darted into the cave-mouth, whipping his sword Scalpel from its sheath. As he entered the cave he zigged a bit to the left, then zagged suddenly to the right and flattened himself against the rocky wall there, slashing prudently at the darkness as he tried to pierce it with his gaze.

Across from him, on the other side of the mouth, the cave bent back in an elbow, the end of which, to the Mouser's amazement, was not dark but dimly lit by a pulsing light that seemed neither that of fire or the outer twilight. If anything, it resembled the unnatural glow they had seen back in the Bones of the Old Ones.

But unnatural or not, it had the advantage of silhouetting the Mouser's antagonist. The squat fellow was now gripping a curved knife rather than a blowgun. As the Mouser sprang at him, he scuttled back along the elbow and dodged around the corner from behind which the pulsing glow came. To the Mouser's further amazement, he felt not only a growing warmth as he pursued but also moistness in the air. He rounded the corner. The black priest, who'd stopped just beyond it, lunged at him. But the Mouser was prepared for this and Scalpel took his adversary neatly in the chest, just off center, transfixing him, while the curved knife slashed only steamy air.

For a moment the fanatic priest tried to work his way up along the thin blade and so get within striking distance of the Mouser. Then the nefandous glare died in the priest's eyes and he slumped, while the Mouser distastefully whipped out the blade.

The priest tottered back into the steamy glow, which the Mouser now saw came from a small pit just beyond. With a blood-choking gargling moan the black one stepped back into the pit and vanished. There was a scuff of flesh against rock, a pause, and then a faint splash, and then no sound at all, except for the soft, distant bubbling and seething that the Mouser now realized came steadily from the pit—that is, until Fafhrd came clumping up belatedly.

"Three to go," the Mouser informed him casually. "The fourth is cooking at the bottom of that pit. But I want broiled dinner tonight, not boiled, and besides I haven't a long enough fork. So fetch in the black stones I dropped."

Fafhrd objected at first, eyeing the steam-and-fire vent almost superstitiously, and urged that they seek other lodging. But the Mouser argued that to spend the night in the now-empty, easily scanned cave was far better than to risk ambush in the outer dark. To the Mouser's relief Fafhrd agreed after peering down the pit for possible handholds that might help a live or boiled attacker. The small man had no desire to leave this pleasantly steamy spot.

The fire was built against the outer wall of the cave and near the mouth, so that no one could creep in without

being revealed by its flames. After they had polished off some grilled liver and a number of tough, seared chops and had tossed the bones into the hot fire, where they sputtered merrily, Fafhrd settled back against the rocky wall and asked the Mouser to let him look at the diamond eye.

The Mouser complied with some reluctance, once again experiencing repugnance for the frostily-gleaming stone's tarry circlet. He had the feeling that Fafhrd was going to do something unwise with the stone—what, he didn't know. But the Northerner merely glanced at it for a moment, almost puzzledly, and then thrust it away in *his* pouch. The Mouser started to object, but Fafhrd curtly replied that it was their common property. The Mouser could not but agree.

They had decided to stand watch by turns, Fafhrd first. The Mouser snuggled his cloak around him, and tucked under his head a pillow made of pouch and folded hood. The coal fire flamed, the strange glow from the pit pulsed wanly. The Mouser found it decidedly pleasant to be between the dry heat of the former and the moist warmth of the latter, both spiced by the chill air from outside. He watched the play of shadows through half-closed eyes. Fafhrd sitting between the Mouser and the flames, bulked reassuringly large, wide-eyed, and alert. The Mouser's last thought as he drowsed off was that he was rather glad that Fafhrd had the diamond. It made his own pillow that much less bumpy.

He woke hearing an odd soft voice. The fire had burned low. For a frightening moment he thought that a stranger had somehow come into the cave—perhaps muttering hypnotic words to put a sleepspell on his comrade. Then he realized that the voice was the one Fafhrd had used last night, and that the Northerner was staring into a diamond eye as if he were seeing limitless visions there, and rocking it slowly to and fro. The rocking made the glittering beams from the gem synchronize with the pulsing glow in a way the Mouser didn't like.

"Earth's blood," Fafhrd was murmuring, his voice almost

a chant, "still pulses strongly under its wrinkled rocky skin, and still bleeds hot and raw from wounds in the mountains. But it needs the blood of heroes before it can shape itself into the form of men."

The Mouser jumped up, grabbed Fafhrd by the shoulder and shook him gently.

"Those who truly worship the earth," Fafhrd went on entrancedly, as if nothing had happened, "guard its mountain-wounds and wait and pray for the great day of fulfillment when the earth shall wake again, this time in man's form, and rid itself of the vermin called men."

The Mouser's shaking became violent and Fafhrd woke with a start—only to assert that he had been awake all the time and that the Mouser had been having a nightmare. He laughed at the Mouser's counterassertions and would not budge from his own. Nor would he give up the diamond, but tucked it deep in his pouch, gave two huge yawns and fell asleep while the Mouser was still expostulating.

The Mouser did not find his watch a pleasant one. In place of his former trust in this rocky nook, he now scented danger in every direction and peered as often at the steamy pit as at the black entrance beyond the glowing coals, entertaining himself with vivid visions of a cooked priest somehow writhing his way up. Meanwhile the more logical part of his mind dwelled on an unpleasantly consistent theory that the hot inner earth was indeed jealous of man, and that the green hill was one of those spots where inner earth was seeking to escape its rocky jacket and form itself into all-conquering man-shaped giants of living stone. The black Kleshite priests would be earth-worshippers eager for the destruction of all other men. And the diamond eye, far from being a bit of valuable and harmless loot, was somehow alive and seeking to enchant Fafhrd with its glittering gaze, and lead him to an obscure doom.

Three times the Mouser tried to get the gem away from his comrade, the third time by slitting the bottom of the Northerner's pouch. But though the Mouser knew himself the most cunning cutpurse in Lankhmar, though perhaps

a trifle out of practice, Fafhrd each time hugged the pouch tighter to him and muttered peevishly in his sleep and unerringly brushed away the Mouser's questing hand. The Mouser thought of taking the diamond eye by force, but was stopped by the unreasoning conviction that this would touch off murderous resistance in the Northerner. Indeed, he had strong misgivings as to the state in which his comrade would awake.

But when the cave-mouth finally lightened, Fafhrd roused himself with a shake and a morning yawn-and-growl as stentorious and genial as any the Mouser had ever winced at. Fafhrd acted with such chipper, clearheaded enthusiasm that the Mouser's fears were quite blown away, or at least driven deep into the back of his mind. The two adventurers had a cold-meat breakfast, and carefully wrapped up and packed away the legs and shoulders that had been roasted during the night.

Then while Fafhrd covered him with arrow nocked to taut bowstring, the Mouser darted out and sprang to cover behind the outside of the stone sheltering the entrance. Bobbing up here and there for quick glances over its top, he scanned the cliff above the cave for any sign of ambushers. Holding his sling at the ready, he covered Fafhrd while the latter rushed forth. After a bit they satisfiied themselves that there were at least no nearby lurkers in the pale dawn, and Fafhrd led off with a swinging stride. The Mouser followed briskly enough, but after a little while became possessed with a doubt. It seemed to him that Fafhrd was not leading them straight along their course, but swinging rather sharply off toward the left. It was hard to be at all sure, for the sun had still not broken through and the sky was filled with purplish and and yellowish scarflike clouds, while the Mouser could not tell for certain just which way they had come yesterday, since things are very different looking back than looking forward.

Nevertheless he voiced his doubts after a while, but Fafhrd replied with such good-humored assurance, "The Cold Waste was my childhood playground, as familiar to me as Lankhmar's mazy alleys or the swampways of Sheelba

to you," that the Mouser was almost completely satisfied. Besides, the day was windless, which pleased the Mouser no end, because of his worship of warmth.

After a good half-day's trudging they mounted a snowy rise and the Mouser's eyebrows rose incredulously at the landscape ahead: a tilted plain of green ice smooth as glass. Its upper edge, which lay somewhat to their right, was broken by jagged pinnacles, like the crest of a great smooth wave. Its lower slope stretched down for a vast distance to their left, finally losing itself in what looked like a white mist, while straight ahead there seemed to be no end.

The plain was so green that it looked like a giddily enchanted ocean, tilted at the command of some mighty magician. The Mouser felt sure it would reflect the stars on a clear night.

He was somewhat horrified, though hardly surprised, when his comrade coolly proposed that they walk straight across it. The Northerner's shrewd gaze had spotted a sectoin just ahead of them where the slope leveled off briefly before sweeping down again. Along this level ribbon, Fafhrd asserted, they could walk with ease—and then the Northerner set out without waiting for a reply.

With a fatalistic shrug the Mouser followed, walking at first as if on eggs and with many an uneasy glance at the great downward slope. He wished he had bronze-cleated boots—even ones worn flat like Fafhrd's—or some sort of spurs to fix to his own slippery shoes, so that he'd have a better chance of stopping himself if he did start to slide. After a while he grew more confident and took longer and swifter, if still most gingerly steps, and the gap Fafhrd had put between them was closed.

They had walked for perhaps three bowshots across the plain, and still had no sight of an end to it, when a flicker of movement in the corner of his right eye made the Mouser look around.

Swiftly and silently sliding down toward them from some hiding place in the ragged crest, came the remaining black priests, three abreast. They kept their footing like expert

skiers—and indeed they seemed to be wearing skis of some sort. Two of them carried spears improvised by thrusting dagger grips into the muzzles of their long blowguns, while the midmost had as lance a narrow, needle-sharp icicle or ice-shard at least eight feet long.

No time now for slings and arrows, and of what use to sword-skewer one who has already spear-skewered you? Besides, an icy slope is no place for dainty near-stationary maneuvering. Without a word to Fafhrd, so certain he was that the Northerner would do the same, the Mouser took off down the dreaded leftward slope.

It was as if he had cast himself into the arms of a demon of speed. Ice whirred softly under his boots, quiet air became cold wind whipping his garments and chilling his cheeks.

But not enough speed. The skiing black priests had a headstart. The Mouser hoped the level stretch would wreck them, but they merely sailed out from it with squat majesty and came down without losing footing—and hardly two spears' lengths behind. Daggers and ice-lance gleamed wickedly.

The Mouser drew Scalpel and after trying fruitlessly to pole himself along with it to greater velocity, squatted down so as to offer the least resistance to the air. Still the black priests gained. Fafhrd beside him dug in his cleated boots so that ice-dust spouted up fountain-wise, and shot off in a great swing sidewards. The priest bearing the ice-lance swerved after him.

Meanwhile the two other priests caught up with the Mouser. He arched his hurtling body away from the spear-thrust of the first and knocked that of the second aside with Scalpel, and for the next few moments there was fought the strangest sort of duel—almost as if they weren't moving at all, since they were all moving at the same speed. At one point the Mouser was sliding down backwards, parrying the nasty blowgun-spears with his shorter weapon.

But two against one always helps, and this time might have proved fatal, if Fafhrd had not just then caromed back from his great sidewards swing full of speed from

some slope he alone had seen, and whirled his dragon-pommeled longsword. He passed just behind the two priests and then their heads were skidding along separately from their bodies, though all at the same speed.

Yet it would have been all up with Fafhrd, for the last black priest, perhaps helped by the weight of his ice-lance, came hurtling after Fafhrd at even greater speed and would have skewered him except the Mouser deflected the ice-lance upward, with Scalpel held in two hands, and the icy point merely ruffled Fafhrd's streaming red hair.

The next moment they all plunged into the white-icy mist. The last glimpse the Mouser had of Fafhrd was of his speeding head alone, cutting a wake in the neck-high mist. Then the Mouser's eyes were beneath the mist's surface.

It was most strange to the Mouser to skim swiftly through milky stuff, ice-crystals stinging his cheeks, not knowing each instant if an unknown barrier might wreck him. He heard a grunt that sounded like Fafhrd's, and on top of that a tingling crash, which might have been the ice-spear shattering, followed by a sighing, tortured moan. Next came the feeling of reaching bottom, followed by an upward swoop, and then the Mouser broke out of the mist into the purple-yellow day and skidded into a soft snowbank and began to laugh wildly with relief. It was some moments before he noticed that Fafhrd, also shaking with laughter, was likewise half buried in the snow beside him.

When Fafhrd looked at the Mouser, the latter shrugged inquiringly at the mist behind them. The northerner nodded confirmingly.

"The last priest dead. None to go!" the Mouser proclaimed happily, stretching in the snow as if it were a featherbed. His chief idea was to find the nearest cave—he was sure there would be one—and enjoy a great rest.

But Fafhrd turned out to be full of other ideas and a seething energy. Nothing must do but they must press on swiftly until dusk, and he presented to the Mouser such alluring pictures of getting out of the Cold Waste by tomorrow, or even nightfall, that the small man soon found

himself trotting along after the big one, though he couldn't help wondering from time to time how Fafhrd could be so supremely sure of his direction in this chaos of ice, snow, and churning unpleasantly-tinted clouds. The whole Cold Waste couldn't have been his playground, surely, the Mouser told himself, with an inward shudder at child Fafhrd's notion of proper places to play.

Twilight overtook them before they reached the forests Fafhrd had promised, and at the Mouser's urgent insistence they began to hunt for a place to pass the night. This time a cave wasn't so easily come by. It was quite dark before Fafhrd spotted a rocky notch with a clump of stunted trees growing in front of it that promised at least fuel and passable shelter.

However, it appeared that the wood would hardly be needed, for just short of the tree-clump was a black rock outcropping resembling the one that had given them coal last night.

But just as Fafhrd joyfully lifted his ax, the outcropping came to life and lunged at his belly with a dagger.

Only Fafhrd's exhuberant and undiminished energy saved his life. He arched his belly aside with a supple swiftness that amazed even the Mouser, and drove the ax deep into his attacker's head. The squat black body thrashed its limbs convulsively and swiftly grew stiff. Fafhrd's deep laughter rumbled like thunder. "Shall we call him the none black priest, Mouser?" he inquired.

But the Mouser saw no cause for amusement. All his uneasiness returned. If they had missed their count on one of the black priests—say the one who had spun down in the snowball or the one supposedly slain in the mist—why mightn't they have missed their count on another? Besides, how could they have been so convinced, simply from an ancient inscription, that there had been only seven black priests? And once you admitted there might have been eight, why mightn't there be nine, or ten, or twenty?

However, Fafhrd merely chuckled at these worries and chopped wood and built a roaring fire in the rocky notch. And although the Mouser knew the fire would advertise

their presence for miles around, he was so grateful for its warmth that he found himself unable to criticize Fafhrd at all severely. And when they had warmed and eaten their roast meat from the morning, such a delicious tiredness came over the Mouser that he tucked his cloak around him and headed straight for sleep. However, Fafhrd chose that moment to drag out and inspect by firelight the diamond eye, which made the Mouser open his own a slit.

This time Fafhrd did not seem inclined to go into a trance. He grinned in a lively and greedy fashion as he turned the gem this way and that, as though to admire the beams flashing from it while mentally appraising its value in square Lankhmarian goldpieces.

Although reassured, the Mouser was annoyed. "Put it away, Fafhrd," he snapped sleepily.

Fafhrd stopped turning the gem and one of its beams blinked directly at the Mouser. The latter shivered, for he had for a moment the sharp conviction that the gem was looking at him with evil intelligence.

But Fafhrd obediently tucked the gem away with a laugh-and-a-yawn and cloaked himself up for sleep. Gradually the Mouser's eerie feelings and realistic fears were both lulled as he watched the dancing flames, and he drowsed off.

The Mouser's next conscious sensations were of being tossed roughly down onto thick grass that felt unpleasantly like fur. His head ached splittingly and there was a pulsing yellow-purple glow, shot through with blinding gleams. It was a few moments before he realized that all these lights were outside his skull rather than inside ti.

He lifted his head to look around and agonzing pain shot through it. However, he persisted and shortly found out where he was.

He was lying on the hillocky, dark-vegetated shore across the acid-seeming lake from the green hill. The night sky was live with Northern Lights, while from the mouthlike slit—now open wider—in the green hill's pinkish top, a red litten smoke came in puffs like a man eagerly panting and and heaving. All the hill's green flank-faces seemed mon-

strously alive in the mixed lights, their mouths twitching and their eyes flashing—as if every one of them held an eye-diamond. While only a few feet away from the Mouser, Fafhrd stood stiffly behind the stubby pillar of rock, which was indeed a carved altar of some sort, topped by a great bowl. The northerner was chanting something in a grunty language the Mouser didn't know and had never heard Fafhrd use.

The Mouser struggled to a sitting positoin. Gingerly feeling his skull, he found a large lump over his right ear. At the same time Fafhrd struck sparks—apparently with stone and steel—above the bowl, and a pillar of purple flame shot up from it, and the Mouser saw that Fafhrd's eyes were tight shut and that in his hand he held the diamond eye.

Then the Mouser realized that the diamond eye had been far wiser than the black priests, who had served its mountain-idol. They, like many priests, had been much too fanatical and not nearly as clever as the god they served. While they had sought to rescue the filched eye and destroy the blasphemous thieves who had stolen it, the eye had taken care of itself very nicely. It had enchanted Fafhrd and deceived him into taking a circling course that would lead him and the Mouser back to the vengeful green hill. It had even speeded up the last stage of the journey, forcing Fafhrd to move by night, carrying the Mouser with him after prudently stunning him in his sleep with a dangerously heavy blow.

Also, the diamond eye must have been more foresighted and purposeful than its priests. It must have some important end in view, over and beyond that of getting itself returned to its mountain-idol. Otherwise, why should it have instructed Fafhrd to preserve the Mouser carefully and bring him along? The diamond eye must have some use for both of them. Through the Mouser's aching brain reverberated the phrase he remembered Fafhrd muttering two nights before: "But it needs the blood of heroes before it can shape itself into the form of man."

As all these thoughts were seething painfully in the

Mouser's brain, he saw Fafhrd coming toward him with diamond eye in one hand and drawn longsword in the other, but a winning smile on his blind face.

"Come, Mouser," Fafhrd said gently, "It is time we crossed the lake and climbed the hill and received the kiss and sweet suck of the topmost lips and mingled our blood with the hot blood of earth. In that way we will live on in the stony rock-giants about to be born, and know with them the joy of crushing cities and trampling armies and stamping on all cultivated fields."

These mad phrases stung the Mouser into action, unintimidated by the pulsing lights of sky and hill. He jerked Scalpel from its scabbard and sprang at Fafhrd, engaging the longsword and making a particularly clever disarming thrust-and-twist guaranteed to send the longsword spinning from Fafhrd's hand--especially since the northerner still had his eyes closed tight.

Instead, Fafhrd's heavy blade evaded the Mouser's swift one as easily as one avoids a baby's slap, and, smiling sorrowfully, sent a rippling thrust at the Mouser's throat that the latter could escape only with the most fantastic and frantic of backward leaps.

The leap took him in the direction of the lake. Instantly Fafhrd closed in, attacking with scornful poise. His large face was a mask of blond contempt. His far heavier sword moved as deftly as Scalpel, weaving a gleaming arabesque of attack that forced the Mouser back, back, back.

And all the while Fafhrd's stayed tight shut. Only when driven to the brink of the lake did the Mouser realize the reason. The diamond eye in Fafhrd's left hand was doing all the seeing for the northerner. It followed every movement of Scalpel with a snaky intentness.

So, as he danced on the slippery black rim above the wildly-reflecting lake, with the skies throbbing yellow-purple above him and the green hill panting behind, the Mouser suddenly ignored Fafhrd's threatening blade and ducked and slashed unexpectedly at the diamond eye.

Fafhrd's cut whistled a finger's breath above the Mouser's head.

The diamond eye, struck by Scalpel, exploded in a white burst.

The black furry ground beneath their feet heaved as if in despairing torment.

The green hill erupted with a vindictive red blast that sent the Mouser staggering and that shot a gush of molten rock twice the hill's height toward the bruised night-sky.

The Mouser grabbed hold of his bewilderingly-staring companion and rushed him away from the green hill and the lake.

A dozen heart-beats after they left the spot, the erupting molten rock drenched the altar and splashed wide. Some of the red gouts came even as far as the Mouser and Fafhrd, shooting fiery darts over their shoulders as they scampered. One of two gouts hit and the Mouser had to beat out a small fire they started in Fafhrd's cloak.

Looking back as he ran, the Mouser got a last glimpse of the green hill. Although still spouting fire and dribbling red streams, it seemed otherwise very solid and still, as though all its potentialities for life were vanished for a time, or forever.

When they finally stopped running, Fafhrd looked stupidly down at his left hand and said, "Mouser, I've cut my thumb. It's bleeding."

"So's the green hill," the Mouser commented, looking back. "And bleeding to death, I'm happy to say."

Lankhmar is rightly called the Imperishable. Legend has it that its towering black walls have endured sieges of three, thirty-eight, seventy-five, and a hundred and twenty-three years. Ningauble hints that its deepest foundations were dug by the devils who misshaped Earth in the days before the gods. Unquestionably Lankhmar has seen the birth and slow death of a thousand cults and divinities, and its deserted temples and ruined fanes were as numerous as its taverns and pleasure gardens in the Time of the Decadence, which was also the time of the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd.

claws from the night

FEAR hovered in the moonlight over Lankhmar. Fear flowed like mist through the twisting thoroughfares and mazy alleyways, trickling even into that most intricately curved and crevicelike street where a sootily flickering lantern marked the doorway to the tavern of the Silver Eel.

It was a subtle fear, not the sort inspired by a besieging army, or warring nobles, or revolting slaves, or a mad overlord bent on wanton slaughter, or an enemy fleet sailing from the Inner Sea into the estuary of the Hlal. But it was none the less potent. It clutched the soft throats of the chattering women now entering the low doorway of the Silver Eel, making their laughter more sudden and shrill. It touched the women's escorts too, making them speak louder and rattle their swords more than necessary.

This was a party of young aristocrats seeking excitement in a place known to be disreputable and somewhat dangerous. Their garments were rich and fantastic, after the fashion of the decadent Lankhmar nobility. But there was one thing that seemed almost too crazily faddish even in exotic Lankhmar. The head of each woman was enclosed in a small delicately-wrought silver bird cage.

Again the door opened, this time to emit two men who

swiftly walked away. The one was tall and hulking, and seemed to be concealing some object under his great cloak. The other was small and lithe, clad from crown to toe in a soft gray that merged with the diffused moonlight. He was carrying a fishpole over his shoulder.

"I wonder what Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are up to now," murmured a hanger-on, peering curiously over his shoulder. The landlord shrugged.

"No good, I'll warrant," pressed the hanger-on. "I saw the thing under Fafhrd's cloak move, as if alive. Today, in Lankhmar, that is most suspicious. You see what I mean? And then the fishpole."

"Peace," said the landlord. "They are two honest rogues, even though much in need of money, if what they owe me for wine is any indication. Say nothing against them."

But he looked a trifle puzzled and perturbed as he went inside again, impatiently pushing the hanger-on ahead of him.

It was three months since the fear had come to Lankhmar, and at the beginning it had been a very different sort of thing—hardly fear at all. Just an overly numerous series of thefts of cheap trinkets and costly gems, with women the chief sufferers. Bright and shining objects, no matter what their nature, were given the preference.

Gossip had it that a band of exceptionally light-fingered and haphazard pilferers was making a specialty of the tiring rooms of great ladies, though the whipping of maids and body-slaves failed to uncover any of the expected confederates. Then someone advanced the theory that it was the work of cunning children too young to judge well the value of objects.

But gradually the character of the thefts began to change. Fewer worthless baubles were taken. More and more often, valuable gems were plucked from a jumble of glass and gilt, giving the odd impression that the marauders were only by practice developing a sense of discrimination.

At about this time people began to suspect that the ancient and almost reputable Thieves Guild of Lankhmar had invented a new stratagem, and there was talk of tor-

turing a few suspected leaders or waiting for a favorable wind and burning the Street of the Silk Merchants.

But since the Thieves Guild was a conservative and hidebound organization more wedded than ever after recent events to traditional methods of thievery, suspicion shifted somewhat when it became increasingly evident that a mentality of incredible daring and ingenuity was at work.

Valuables disappeared in broad daylight, even from chambers locked and carefully guarded, or from sheer-walled roof-gardens. A lady secure in her home chanced to lay a bracelet on an inaccessible windowledge; it vanished while she chatted with a friend. A lord's daughter, walking in a private garden, felt someone reach down from a thickly-leafed tree and snatch a diamond pin from her hair; the tree was immediately climbed by nimble servitors, but nothing was found.

Then an hysterical maid ran to her mistress with the information that she had just seen a large bird, black in color, making off through a window with an emerald ring clutched securely in its talons.

This story at first met with angry disbelief. It was concluded that the girl herself must have stolen the ring. She was whipped almost to death amid general approval.

The next day a large black bird swooped down on the niece of the Overlord and ripped a jewel from her ear.

Many corroborations were immediately forthcoming. People told of seeing birds of unusual appearance at odd times and places. It was recalled that in each of the thefts an aerial route had been left open. The victims began to remember things that had seemed inconsequential at the time—the beat of wings, the rustle of feathers, bird tracks and droppings, hovering shadows and the like.

All Lankhmar buzzed with amazed speculation. It was believed, however, that the thefts would cease, now that the authors were known and suitable precautions taken. No especial significance was attached to the injured ear of the Overlord's niece. Both these judgments proved wrong.

Two days later, the notorious courtesan Lessnya was beset by a large black bird while crossing a wide square.

Forewarned, Lessnya struck at the bird with a gilt wand she was carrying, shouting to scare it off.

To the horror of the onlookers, the bird eluded the wild blows, set its talons in her white shoulder, and pecked her right eye viciously. Thereupon it gave a shuddering squawk, flapped its wings, and took off amid a flurry of black feathers, gripping a jade brooch in its claws.

Within the next three days, five more women were robbed in the same way; three of these were mutilated.

Lankhmar was frightened. Such unwholesomely purposeful behavior on the part of birds roused all sorts of superstitious fear. Bowmen armed with triple-pronged fowling-arrows were stationed on the roofs. Timid women stayed indoors, or wore cloaks to hide their jewels. Shutters were kept closed at night despite the summer heat. Considerable numbers of innocent pigeons and gulls were shot or poisoned. Cocky young nobles summoned their falconers and went hawking after the marauders.

But they had difficulty in locating any; and on the few occasions they did, their falcons found themselves opposed to adversaries who flew swiftly and fought back successfully. More than one mews mourned the death of a favorite fighting bird. All efforts to trace the winged thieves failed.

These activities did have one tangible result. Most of the attacks and thefts thereafter occurred during the hours of darkness.

Then a woman died painfully three hours after having been clawed around the neck, and black-robed physicians averred that there must have been a virulent poison in the wounding talons.

Panic grew and wild theories were advanced. The priests of the Great God maintained that it was a divine rebuke to feminine vanity, and made dire prophecies about an imminent revolt of all animals against sinful man. Astrologers dropped dark and disturbing hints. A frantic mob burned a rookery belonging to a wealthy grain merchant, and then milled through the streets, stoning all birds and

killing three of the sacred black swans before being dispersed.

Still the attacks continued. And Lankhmar, with her usual resiliency, began to adjust herself somewhat to this bizarre and inexplicable siege from the sky. Rich women made a fashion of their fear by adopting silver networks to protect their features. Several wits made jokes about how, in a topsy-turvy world, the birds were loose and the women wore the cages. The courtesan Lessnya had her jeweler contrive a lustrous eye of hollow gold, which men said added to her exotic beauty.

Then Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser appeared in Lankhmar. Few guessed where the huge northern barbarian and his small, dexterous companion had been or why they had returned at this particular time. Nor did Fafhrd or the Gray Mouser offer any explanations.

They busied themselves with inquiries at the Silver Eel and elsewhere, drinking much wine but avoiding brawls. Through certain devious channels of information the Mouser learned that the fabulously wealthy but socially unacceptable moneylender Muulsh had bought a famous ruby from the King of the East—then hard-pressed for cash—and was going to give it to his wife. Whereupon the Mouser and Fafhrd made further inquiries and certain secret preparations, and slipped away together from the tavern of the Silver Eel on a moonlit night, bearing objects of a mysterious nature which awakened doubts and suspicions in the mind of the landlord and others.

For there was no denying that the thing Fafhrd carried under his great cloak moved as if alive and was the size of a large bird.

Moonlight did not soften the harsh angular lines of the great stone house of Muulsh the moneylender. Square, flat-roofed, small-windowed, three stories high, it stood a little distance from the similar houses of the wealthy grain merchants like a rejected hanger-on.

Close to it flowed the waters of the Hlal, angrily churning past this portion of the city, which thrust out like an

elbow into the mighty stream. Abutting and o'ertopping it on the side nearest the river loomed a lightless, tower-like structure, one of the several accursed and abandoned temples of Lankhmar, shut up in ancient times for reasons now known only to certain priests and necromancers.

Crowding close on the other side were the dark, solid forms of warehouses. There was an impression of tight-lipped power about this house of Muulsh—of great wealth and weighty secrets closely guarded.

But the Gray Mouser, peering down through one of the usual Lankhmar roof-windows into the tiring room of Muulsh's wife, was seeing a very different aspect of Muulsh's character. The notoriously heartless moneylender, quailing under a connubial tongue-lashing, looked like nothing so much as a fawning lapdog—except perhaps an anxious and solicitous hen.

"You worm! You slug! You gross, fat beast!" his slender young wife railed at him, almost chanting the words. "You've ruined my life with your stinking money-grubbing! Not one noblewoman will even speak to me. Not one lord or grain merchant so much as dares flirt with me. Everywhere I am ostracized. And all because your fingers are greasy and vile from handling coins!"

"But Atya," he murmured timidly, "I've always thought you had friends to visit. Almost every day you go off for hours on end—though without telling me where you've been."

"You insensitive clod!" she cried. "Is it any wonder that I slip away to some lonely nook to weep and seek bitter consolation, in private? You will never understand the delicacy of my emotions. Why did I ever marry you? I wouldn't have, you may be sure—except that you forced my poor father into it when he was in difficulties. You bought me! It's the only way you know of getting anything.

"And then when my poor father died, you had the effrontery to buy this house, his house, the house I was born in. You did it to complete my humiliation. To take me back where everybody knew me and could say, 'There goes the

wife of that utterly impossible moneylender'—if they use such a polite word as wife! All you want is to torture and degrade me, drag me down to your own unutterable level. Oh, you obscene pig!"

And she made a tattoo with her gilded heels on the gleaming parquetry of the floor. Clad in yellow silk tunic and pantaloons, she was very pretty in a small, slight way. Her small-chinned, bright-eyed face was oddly attractive under its canopy of gleamingly smooth black hair. Her swift movements had the quality of restless fluttering. At the moment her every gesture conveyed anger and unbearable irritation, but there was also a kind of studied ease about her manner that suggested to the Mouser, who was hugely enjoying everything, a scene that had been played and replayed many times.

The room suited her well, with its silken hangings and fragile furniture. Low tables, scattered about, were crowded with jars of cosmetics, bowls of sweetmeats, and all sorts of frivolous bric-a-brac. The flames of slim tapers swayed in the warm breeze from the open windows.

On delicate chains were suspended a full dozen cages of canaries, nightingales, love birds, and other tiny warblers, some drowsing, others chirruping sleepily. Here and there were strewn small fluffy rugs. All in all, a very downy nest amidst the stoniness of Lankhmar.

Muulsh was somewhat as she had described him—fat, ugly, and perhaps twenty years older than she. His gaudy tunic fitted him like a sack. The look of mingled apprehension and desire he fixed upon his wife was irresistibly comic.

"Oh, Atya, my little dove, do not be angry with me. I try so hard to please you, and I love you so very much," he cried, and tried to lay his hand on her arm. She eluded him. He hurried clumsily after her, immediately bumping into one of the bird cages, which hung at an inconvenient height. She turned on him in a miniature fury.

"Disturb my pets, will you, you brute! There, there, my dears, don't be frightened. It's just the old she-elephant."

"Damn your pets!" he cursed impulsively, holding his forehead. Then he recollected himself and dodged backward, as if in fear of being thwacked with a slipper.

"Oh! So in addition to all your other crude affronts, we are also to be damned?" she said, her voice suddenly icy.

"No, no, my beloved Atya. I forgot myself. I love you very much, and your feathered pets as well. I meant no harm."

"Of course you meant no harm! You merely want to torment us to death. You want to degrade and——"

"But Atya," he interrupted placatingly, "I don't think I've really degraded you. Remember, even before I married you, your family never mingled with Lankhmar society."

That remark was a mistake, as the eavesdropping Mouser, choking back his laughter, could plainly see. Muulsh must have realized it too, for as Atya went white and reached for a heavy crystal bottle, he retreated and cried out, "I've brought you a present."

"I can imagine what it's like," she sneered disdainfully, relaxing a trifle but still holding the bottle poised. "Some trinket a lady would give her maid. Or flashy rags fit only for a harlot."

"Oh, no, my dear. This is a gift for an empress."

"I don't believe you. It's because of your foul taste and filthy manners that Lankhmar won't accept me." Her fine, decadently weak features contracted in a pout, her charming bosom still rising and falling from anger. "'She's the concubine of Muulsh the moneylender,' they say, and snigger at me. Snigger!"

"They've no right to. I can buy the lot of them! Just wait until they see you wearing my gift. It's a jewel that the wife of the Overlord would give her eyeteeth to possess!"

At mention of the word "jewel" the Mouser sensed a subtle shiver of anticipation run through the room. More than that, he saw one of the silken hangings stir in a way that the lazy breeze could hardly account for.

He edged cautiously forward, craning his neck and

peered down sideways into the space between the hangings and the wall. Then slowly a smile of elfish amusement appeared on his compact, snub-nosed face.

Crouched in the faintly amber luminescence that filtered through the draperies were two scrawny men, naked except for dark breech-cloths. Each carried a bag big enough to fit loosely over a human head. From these bags leaked a faint soporific scent that the Mouser had noticed before without being able to place.

The Mouser's smile deepened. Noiselessly he drew forward the slim fishpole at his side and inspected the line and the stickily-smeared claws that served for a hook.

"Show me the jewel!" said Atya.

"I shall, my dear. At once," answered Muulsh. "But don't you think we'd first best close the sky-window and the other ones?"

"We'll do nothing of the kind!" snapped Atya. "Must I stifle just because a lot of old women have given way to a silly fear?"

"But my dove, it's not a silly fear. All Lankhmar is afraid. And rightly."

He moved as though to call a slave. Atya stamped her foot pettishly. "Stop, you fat coward! I refuse to give way to childish frights. I won't believe any of those fantastic stories, no matter how many great ladies swear to them. Don't you dare have the windows closed. Show me the jewel at once, or—or I'll never be nice to you again."

She seemed close to hysteria. Muulsh sighed and resigned himself.

"Very well, my sweet."

He walked over to an inlaid table by the door, clumsily ducking past several bird cages, and fumbled at a small casket. Four pairs of eyes followed him intently. When he returned there was something in his hand that glittered. He set it down on the center of the table.

"There," he said, stepping back. "I told you it was fit for an empress, and it is."

For a space there was breathless silence in the room. The

two thieves behind the draperies edged forward hungrily, quietly loosening the drawstrings of the bags, their feet caressing the polished floor like cats' paws.

The Mouser slid the slim fishing rod through the sky-window, avoiding the silver chains of the cages, until the pendant claw was poised directly above the center of the table, like a spider preparing to drop on an unsuspecting large red beetle.

Atya stared. A new dignity and self-respect crept into Muulsh's expression. The jewel gleamed like a fat, lucent, quivering drop of blood.

The two thieves crouched to spring. The Mouser joggled the rod slightly, gauging his aim before he dropped the claw. Atya reached out an eager hand and moved toward the table.

But all these intended actions were simultaneously interrupted.

There was a beat and whirr of powerful wings. An inky bird a little larger than a crow flapped through a side window and skidded down into the room, like a fragment of blackness detached from the outer night. Its talons made arm-long scratches as it hit the table. Then it arched its neck, gave a loud, shuddering squawk, and launched itself toward Atya.

The room whirled with chaotic movements. The gummed claw halted midway in its drop. The two thieves fought ungracefully to keep their balance and avoid being seen. Muulsh waved his arms and shouted, "Shoo! Shoo!" Atya collapsed.

The black bird swept close past Atya, its wings brushing and striking the silver cages, and beat out into the night.

Again there was momentary silence in the room. The gentle songbirds had been quite stilled by the incursion of their raptorial brother. The rod vanished through the sky-window. The two thieves scuttled behind the draperies and noiselessly edged toward a door. Their looks of bafflement and fright were giving way to professional chagrin.

Atya rose to her knees, dainty hands pressed to her face.

A shudder tightened around Muulsh's fleshy neck and he moved toward her.

"Did it—did it hurt you? Your face. It struck at you."

Atya dropped her hands, revealing an unmaimed countenance. She stared at her husband. Then all at once the stare changed to a glare, like a pot suddenly come to a boil.

"You big useless hen!" she cried out. "For all you cared, it might have pecked out both my eyes! Why didn't you do something? Yelling 'Shoo! Shoo!' when it struck at me! And the jewel gone forever now! Oh, you miserable capon!"

She rose to her feet, taking off one of her slippers with a wildly determined air. Muulsh retreated, protesting, and bumped into a whole cluster of bird cages.

Only Fafhrd's tossed-aside cloak marked the spot where the Gray Mouser had left him. Hastening to the roof-edge, he made out Fafhrd's large form some distance away across the roofs of the adjoining warehouses. The barbarian was staring at the moonlit sky. The Mouser gathered up the cloak, leaped the narrow gap, and followed.

When the Mouser reached him, Fafhrd was grinning with great satisfaction so that his big white teeth showed. The size of his supple, brawny frame and the amount of metal-studded leather he wore in the form of arm-bands and broad belt were as much out of tune with civilized Lankhmar as were his long, copper hair, handsomely rugged features, and pale northern skin, ghostly in the moonlight. Firmly clutching his heavy hawking-glove at the wrist was a white-capped eagle, which ruffled its feathers and made a disagreeable gargling noise in its throat at the Mouser's approach.

"Now tell me I can't hawk by full moon!" he cried out in great good humor. "I don't know what happened in the room, or what luck you had, but as for the black bird that went in and came out—— Lo! It is here!"

He pushed at a limp bundle of black-feathers with his foot.

The Mouser hissed the names of several gods in quick succession, then asked, "But the jewel?"

"I don't know about that," said Fafhrd, brushing the matter aside. "Ah, but you should have seen it, little man! A wondrous fight!" His voice regained its enthusiasm. "The other one flew swift and cunningly but Kooskra here rose like the north wind up a mountain pass. For a while I lost them in the gray. There seemed to be something of a fight. Then Kooskra brought him down."

The Mouser had dropped to his knees and was gingerly examining Kooskra's quarry. He slipped a small knife from his belt.

"And to think," continued Fafhrd, as he adjusted a leather hood over the eagle's head, "that they told me these birds were demons or fierce phantasms of darkness! Faugh! They're only ungainly, night-flying crows."

"You talk too loudly," said the Mouser. Then he looked up. "But there's no gainsaying that tonight the eagle beat the fishpole. See what I found in this one's gullet. He kept it to the end."

Fafhrd snatched the ruby from the Mouser with his free hand and held it up to the moon.

"King's ransom!" he cried. "Mouser, our fortune's made! I see it all. We shall follow these birds as they rob and let Kooskra rape them of their booty." He laughed aloud.

This time there was no warning beat of wings—only a gliding shadow which grazed Fafhrd's upraised hand and slid silently away. It almost came to rest on the roof, then flapped powerfully upward.

"Blood of Kos!" cursed Fafhrd, waking from his dumfounded amazement. "Mouser, he's taken it!" Then, "At him, Kooskra! At him!" as he swiftly unhooded the eagle.

But this time it was apparent from the first that something was wrong. The beat of the eagle's wings was slow, and he seemed to have difficulty gaining height. Nevertheless he drew near the quary. The black bird veered suddenly, swooped, and rose again. The eagle followed closely, though his flight was still unsteady.

Wordlessly Fafhrd and the Mouser watched the birds approach the massive, high-reared tower of the deserted

temple, until their feathered forms were silhouetted against its palely glowing, ancient surface.

Kooskra seemed then to recover full power. He gained a superior position, hovered while his quarry frantically darted and wheeled, then plummeted down.

"Got him, by Kos!" breathed Fafhrd, thumping his knee with his fist.

But it was not so. Kooskra struck at thin air. At the last moment the black bird had slipped aside and taken cover in one of the high-set windows of the tower.

And now it was certain beyond doubt that something was wrong with Kooskra. He sought to beat about the embrasure sheltering his quarry, but lost height. Abruptly he turned and flew out from the wall. His wings moved in an irregular and convulsive way. Fafhrd's fingers tightened apprehensively on the Mouser's shoulder.

As Kooskra reached a point above them, he gave a great wild scream that shook the soft Lankhmar night. Then he fell, like a dead leaf, circling and spinning. Only once again did he seem to make an effort to command his wings, and then to no avail.

He landed heavily a short distance from them. When Fafhrd reached the spot, Kooskra was dead.

The barbarian knelt there, absently smoothing the feathers, staring up at the tower. Puzzlement, anger, and some sorrow lined his face.

"Fly north, old bird," he murmured in a deep, small voice. "Fly into nothingness, Kooskra." Then he spoke to the Mouser. "I find no wounds. Nothing touched him on this flight, I'll swear."

"It happened when he brought down the other," said the Mouser soberly. "You did not look at the talons of that ugly fowl. They were smeared with a greenish stuff. Through some small gouge it entered him. Death was in him while he sat on your wrist, and it worked faster when he flew at the black bird."

Fafhrd nodded, still staring at the tower. "We've lost a fortune and a faithful killer, tonight. But the night's not

done. I have a curiosity about these death-dealing shadows."

"What are you thinking?" asked the Mouser.

"That a man might easily hurl a grapnel and a line over a corner of that tower, and that I have such a line wound around my waist. We used it to mount Muulsh's roof, and I shall use it again. Don't waste your words, little man. Muulsh? What have we to fear from him? He saw a bird take the jewel. Why should he send guards to search the roofs?

"Yes, I know the bird will fly away when I go after him. But he may drop the jewel, or you may get in a lucky cast with your sling. Besides, I have a special notion about these matters. Poison claws? I'll wear my gloves and cloak, and carry a naked dagger. Come on, little man. We'll not argue. That corner away from Muulsh's and the river should do the trick. The one where the tiny broken spire rises. We come, oh tower!" And he stripped off his hawking-glove and shook his fist.

The Mouser hummed a fragment of song under his breath and kept glancing around apprehensively, as he steadied the line by which Fafhrd was mounting the wall of the tower-temple. He felt decidedly ill at ease, what with Fafhrd on a fool's errand, and the night's luck probably run out, and the ancient temple silent and desolate.

It was forbidden on pain of death to enter such places, and no man knew what evil things might lurk there, fattening on loneliness. Besides all that, the moonlight was too revealing; he winced at the thought of what excellent targets he and Fafhrd made against the wall.

In his ears droned the low but mightly clamor of the waters of the Hlal, which swished and eddied past the base of the opposite wall. Once it seemed to him that the temple itself vibrated as though the Hlal were gnawing at its vitals.

Before his feet yawned the dark, six-foot chasm separating the warehouse from the temple. It allowed a sidewise glimpse of the walled temple-garden, overgrown with pale weeds and clogged with decay.

And now as he glanced in that direction he saw some-

thing that made him raise his eyebrows and sent a shiver crawling over his scalp. For across the moonlit space stole a manlike but unwholesomely bulky figure.

The Mouser's impression was that the strange body lacked the characteristic human curves and taperings of limb, that its face lacked features, that it was unpleasantly froglike. It seemed to be colored a uniform dull brown.

It vanished in the direction of the temple. What it was, the Mouser could not for the moment conjecture.

Intent on warning Fafhrd, he looked up, but the barbarian was already swinging into the embrasure at a dizzy height above. Disliking to shout, he paused undecided, half of a mind to skin up the line and join his comrade. All the while he kept humming a fragment of song—one used by thieves and supposed to enforce slumber on the inmates of a house being robbed. He wished fervently that the moon would get under a cloud.

Then, as if his fear had fathered a reality, something roughly grazed his ear and hit with a deadened thump against the temple wall. He knew what that meant—a ball of wet clay projected by a sling.

As he let his body collapse, two similar missiles followed the first. Close range, he could tell from the impact, and designed to kill rather than stun. He scanned the moonlit roof, but could see nothing. Before his knees touched the roof he had decided what he must do if he were to help Fafhrd at all. There was one quick way of retreat and he took it.

He grasped the long slack of the rope and dove into the chasm between the buildings, as three more balls of clay flattened against the wall.

As Fafhrd warily swung into the embrasure and found solid footing, he realized what had been bothering him about the character of the weatherworn carvings on the ancient wall. In one way or another they all seemed to be concerned with birds—raptorial birds in particular—and with human beings having grotesque avian features: beaked heads, batlike wings, and taloned limbs.

There was a whole border of such creatures around the

embrasure, and the projecting stone ornament over which the grapnel was caught represented the head of a hawk. This unpleasant coincidence loosened the stout gates of fear within him and a faint sense of awe and imminent horror trickled into his mind, extinguishing a part of his anger at Kooskra's repellent death. But at the same time it served to confirm certain vague notions that had come to him earlier.

He looked around. The black bird seemed to have retreated into the interior of the tower, where tenuous moonlight revealed an obscurely littered stone floor and a door half open on a rectangle of blackness. Whipping out a long knife, he tread softly inward, shifting his weight slowly from one foot to the other to feel for possible weaknesses in the centuries-old masonry.

It grew darker and then a little lighter, as his straining eyes accustomed themselves to the dimness. The stone beneath his feet became slippery. And in stronger and stronger waves there was borne to his nostrils the pungent, musty smell of a mews.

There was an intermittent soft rustling, too. He told himself it was only natural that birds of some sort—perhaps pigeons—should nest in this deserted structure, but a darker train of reasoning insisted that his previous speculations were right.

He passed a projecting panel of stone and came into the chief upper chamber of the tower.

Moonlight striking through two gaps in the ceiling high above vaguely revealed alcoved walls, which widened away from him toward the left. The sound of the Hlal was muted and deepened here, as though it rose up more through the stones than through the air. He was very close, now, to the half-open door.

He noted a tiny grilled opening in it, like that of a cell. Rising against the wall at the broad end of the room was what seemed to be an altar of some sort, embellished by indistinct sculptures. And on either side of it, in regular terraces like those of the altar itself, were tier on tier of small black blots.

Then he heard a raucous, falsetto cry, "Man! Man! Kill! Kill!" and saw a portion of the black blots launch themselves from the tiers, expanding in size as they spread their wings and converged upon him.

And largely because his fear had been expecting this, he jerked up his cloak to protect his naked head and whirled his knife at them in sweeping strokes. This close he could see them better: inky-feathered, cruelly taloned birds, each a brother to the two Kooskra had fought, squawking, squawking, striking at him like fighting-cocks able to fly.

At first he thought he could readily beat them off, but it was like fighting an eddying storm of shadows. Perhaps he struck two or three. He could not tell. And it made no difference. He felt talons graps and prick his left wrist.

Then, because it seemed the only thing to do, he leaped through the half-open door, slammed it behind him, knifed off the bird that clung like death to his wrist, found the pricks by touch, nicked them with his knife, and sucked the poison that might have been on the talons.

His shoulder instinctively pressed against the door, he listened to their baffled flapping and angry croaking. From here escape would be difficult; this inner room was indeed nothing but a cell, lightless save for the trace of moonlight that filtered through the grilled hole in the door. He could conjecture no ready way of regaining the embrasure and descending—they would have him completely at their mercy as he clung to the line.

He wanted to bellow a warning to the Mouser, but was afraid that his shouts, probably unintelligible at the distance, would only summon the Mouser into the same trap. In a rage of uncertainty he trod vindictively the body of the bird he had slain.

Gradually his fears and anger calmed somewhat. The birds seemed to have retreated. No longer did they swoop futilely against the door or cling screaming to the grillwork in the opening.

Through this aperture he could gain a fair view of the shadowy altar and the ladderlike perches. The black occu-

pants were restless, edging back and forth, crowding one another, flurrying excitedly from perch to perch. The air was heavy with their smell.

And then he heard again the raucous, falsetto voice, only this time there was more than one.

"Jewels, jewels. Bright, bright."

"Sparkling ones. Shining ones."

"Ear to tear. Eye to peck."

"Cheek to scratch. Neck to claw."

And this time there was no doubting that it was the birds themselves who spoke. Fafhrd stared, fascinated. He had heard birds talk before—cursing parrots and slit-tongued ravens. Here there was the same monotony of tone and impression of mindlessness, the same vituperative repetitions. Indeed he had known parrots able to mimic human voices much more accurately.

But the phrases themselves were so devilishly apt that he momentarily feared they would cease to be mere isolated chatterings and become an intelligent discourse, with question and answer fitting. And he could not forget that undeniably purposeful command, "Man! Man! Kill! Kill!"

As he listened spellbound to their cruel chorus, a figure stole past the grilled opening toward the altar. It was manlike only in its general form, featureless, with a uniform, leathery brown surface, like a heavy-hided, hairless bear. He saw the birds launch themselves at this strange figure too, and swarm around it, squawling and striking.

But it paid them no attention whatever, as though it were immune to beaks and poisoned claws. It strode unhurriedly with upraised head toward the altar. There the shifting moonlight from a gap above now struck almost vertically, making a pallid puddle on the floor before the altar itself, and Fafhrd saw the creature fumble at a large casket and begin to lift out small things that gleamed and glittered, unmindful of the birds which swirled around in ever greater number.

Then the creature moved so that the moonlight fell full upon it, and Fafhrd saw that it was a man clad in an ungainly suit of thick leather, with two long thin slits for

eyeholes. He was clumsily but methodically transferring the contents of the casket to a leather bag he carried. And Fafhrd realized that the casket had been the cache for the many jewels and trinkets the birds had stolen.

The leather-armored form completed its task and strode off the way it had come, still surrounded by the small, black stormcloud of perplexedly squawking birds.

But as the figure came opposite Fafhrd the birds suddenly dropped away from it and flew back toward the altar, as if in obedience to a command that had come to them through the general din. The leather-armored form stopped dead and glanced searchingly around, the long eye-slits giving it an appearance of cryptic menace.

Then it started forward again. But simultaneously a noose dropped and tightened like a drawstring around the leather bag that formed its head.

The figure began to struggle and to stagger erratically, pawing at its neck with its leather-cased hand. Then it flailed both arms around in a ponderous, desperate way, so that the bag it still held came open and spurted jewels and jeweled metal. Finally a cunning jerk of the lasso sprawled it on the floor.

Fafhrd chose this moment to make a break for freedom. He relied on confusion and surprise. But in this he was not wise. Perhaps a trace of poison in his veins had touched his mind a little.

He almost reached the passage leading to the embrasure before a second noose tightened cruelly around his own throat. His running feet went out from under him and his skull thumped the floor as he fell. The noose tightened further until he felt he was suffocating in a sea of black feathers wherein all the jewels of the world flashed blindingly.

As consciousness painfully pounded its way back into his skull, he heard a voice crying out frightenedly and jerkily:

"In the name of the Great God, who are you? What are you?"

Then a second voice answering—high, sweet, swift, bird-

like, imperious, icy: "I am the winged priestess, mistress of the hawks. I am the clawed queen, the feathered princess, incarnation of She who has ruled here forever, despite priests' interdict and Overlord's command. I am she who visits suitable injury on the haughty and voluptuous women of Lankhmar. I am she who sends messengers to take the tribute that was once laid freely though tremblingly upon my altar."

Then the first voice spoke, in great apprehension, though not weakly: "But you cannot mean to doom me in so hideous a way. I will keep your secrets well. I am only a thief."

Then the second voice again, "You are indeed a thief, for you sought to ravish the altar-treasure of Winged Tyaa, and for that crime the birds of Tyaa mete out punishment as they see fit. If they think you deserve mercy they will not kill; only peck out an eye—or, perhaps, two."

There was a trilling and chirruping quality to the voice, so that Fafhrd's tortured brain kept picturing some impossibly monstrous songbird. He sought to struggle to his feet, but found he was bound tightly to a chair. His arms and legs were numb, his left arm in addition ached and burned.

Then the soft moonlight ceased to be so much of a shooting pain, and he saw he was still in the same chamber, near the grilled door, facing the altar. Beside him was another chair, and in it sat the leather-armored man, similarly bound. But the leather hood had been removed, revealing the shaven skull and pockmarked, heavy-featured face of a man whom Fafhrd recognized—Stravas, a well-known cutpurse.

"Tyaa, Tyaa," squawked the birds. "Eyes to peck. Nose to rip."

The eyes of Stravas were dark creases of fear between his shaven brows and thick cheeks. He spoke again toward the altar.

"I am a thief. Yes. But so are you. The gods of this temple are banned and forbidden. The Great God himself cursed them. Centuries ago they left this place. Whatever else you may be, you are an interloper. Somehow, perhaps

by magic, you taught the birds to steal, knowing that many of them by nature like to pilfer shining things. What they steal, you take.

"You are no better than I, who guessed your secret and contrived a way to rob you in turn. You are no priestess, meting out death for sacrilege. Where are your worshippers? Where is your priesthood? Where are your benefactions? You are a thief!"

He strained tautly forward against his bonds, as if wanting to hurl himself toward the doom that might answer his reckless speech. Then Fafhrd saw, standing behind Stravas, a figure that made him doubt if his senses had rightly returned. For it was that of another leather-masked man.

But, as he blinked hard and peered again, he saw that the mask was only a small visor and that otherwise the man was clothed as a falconer, with heavy jerkin and huge gauntlets. From the broad leather belt hung a shortsword and a coiled lasso. Twisting around, Fafhrd glimpsed the outlines of a similar figure beside his own chair.

Then the voice from the altar answered, somewhat more strident and shrill, but still musical and horribly birdlike. And as it answered, the birds chorused, "Tyaa! Tyaa!"

"Now indeed you will die, and in tatters. And that one beside you, whose impious eagle slew Kivies and was by him slain, shall die too. But you will die knowing that Tyaa is Tyaa, and that her priestess and incarnate self is no interloper."

And now Fafhrd looked straight at the altar—an action which he had unconsciously avoided up until this moment because of an overpowering superstitious awe and a queer revulsion.

The downward-striking shaft of moonlight had moved a little further toward the altar, revealing two stone figures which jutted out from it on either side, like gargoyles. Their carven faces were the faces of women but the menacingly bent arms ended in claws, and folded wings thrust over the shoulders. Whatever ancient craftsman had formed them, he had worked with devilish skill, for they gave the

impression of being about to spread their stony wings and launch forward into the air.

On the altar itself, between the winged women, but further back and out of the moonlight, perched a large black shape with pendant crescents of blackness that might have been wings. Fafhrd stared at it, licking his lips, his poison-dulled mind unable to cope with the possibilities it conjured up.

But at the same time, although he was hardly aware of what they were doing, his long-fingered supple hands were beginning to work at the tight lashings that confined his wrists.

"Know, fool," came the voice from the black shape, "that gods do not cease to be when banned by false priests, or flee when cursed by a false and presumptuous god. Though priest and worshipper depart, they linger. I was small and I had no wings when I first climbed to this place, yet I felt their presence in the very stones. And I knew that my heart was sister to them."

At that moment Fafhrd heard the Mouser calling his name, faintly and muffledly, but unmistakably. It seemed to come from the lower interior regions of the temple, mingling with the faint, deep-throated roar of the Hlal. The shape on the altar gave a trilling call and made a gesture, so that one of pendant crescents moved.

A single black bird skimmed down to perch on the wrist of the falconer behind Stravas. Then the falconer moved away. His footsteps sounded as though he were descending a stair. The other falconer hastened to the embrasure through which Fafhrd had entered, and there was the sound of knife sawing rope. Then he returned.

"It seems that Tyaa does not lack worshippers tonight," chittered the shape on the altar. "And some day all the luxurious women of Lankhmar will mount terrified but unresisting to this place, to sacrifice portions of their beauty to Tyaa."

It appeared to Fafhrd's sharpening eyesight that the blackness of the shape was too smooth for feathers, yet he

could not be sure. He continued to work at the lashings, feeling those on his right wrist loosen.

"Beauty to spoil. Beauty to spoil," hoarsely chanted the birds. "Kiss with beak. Pet with claw."

"When I was small," continued the voice, "I only dreamed of such things, stealing away secretly when I could from my father's house to this holy place. Yet even at that time the spirit of Tyaa was in me, making me feared and avoided by others.

"Then one day I found a young wounded bird hiding here, and I nursed it back to health. It was a descendant of one of the ancient birds of Tyaa, who, when the temple was defiled and shut up, flew away to the Mountains of Darkness to await the time when Tyaa would call them back. Sensing by occult means that Tyaa had been reborn in me, it had returned. It knew me, and slowly—because we were small and alone—we remembered some of the ancient rituals and regained the power of conversing together.

"Then as year followed year, the others straggled back from the Mountains of Darkness, one by one. And these mated. And our ceremonies grew in perfection. It became difficult for me to be a priestess of Tyaa, without the outer world uncovering my secret. There was food to get, blood and flesh. There were long hours of instruction.

"Yet I persevered. And all the while those of my station in the outer world hated me more and more, sensing my power, and they affronted me and sought to humiliate me.

"A thousand times a day the honor of Tyaa was trampled in the dust. I was cheated of the privileges of my birth and station, and forced to consort with the uncouth and vulgar. Yet I submitted, and acted as if I were one of them, mocking their witnessness and frivolity and vanity. I bided my time, feeling within me the ever-strengthening spirit of Tyaa."

"Tyaa! Tyaa!" echoed the birds.

"And then I searched for and found helpers in my quest: two descendants of the ancient Falconers of Tyaa, whose families had cherished the old worship and the old tradi-

tions. They knew me and did me homage. They are my priesthood."

Fafhrd sensed the falconer beside him bow reverently low. He felt as if he were witnessing some malign shadow-show. Apprehension for the Mouser was like a lead weight pressing down on his confused thoughts. Irrelevantly, he noted a pearl-crusted brooch and a sapphire bracelet on the dirtied floor a little way from his chair. The jewels still lay where they had spilled from Stravas' bag.

"Four months ago," persisted the voice, "in the waning of the Moon of the Owl, I felt that Tyaa had grown to full stature in me, and that the time had come for Tyaa's reckoning with Lankhmar.

"So I sent the birds forth to take the old tribute, bidding them punish when tribute was refused, or when the woman was notorious for vanity and pride. Swiftly they regained all their old cunning. Tyaa's altar was fittingly decked. And Lankhmar learned to fear, though not knowing they feared Tyaa. It shall not be so for long!" Here the voice became piercingly shrill.

"Soon I shall proclaim Tyaa openly. The doors of the temple will be opened to worshipper and tribute-bringer. The idols of the Great God will be cast down, and his temples broken. The rich and insolent women who despised Tyaa in me will be summoned here. And this altar will feel again the sweetness of sacrifice." The voice rose to a screech. "Even now it begins! Even now two interlopers will feel Tyaa's vengeance!"

Sound of a shuddering inhalation came from Stravas' throat, and he rocked futilely from side to side against his bonds. Fafhrd pried frantically at the loosening lashing of his right hand. A portion of the black birds rose at command from their perches—but then settled uncertainly back, for the trilling command was not completed.

The other falconer had returned and was advancing toward the altar, his right hand raised in solemn salute. There was no bird on his wrist now. In his left hand he carried a bloody shortsword.

The shape on the altar eagerly edged forward into the moonlight, so that Fafhrd saw it clearly for the first time. It was no giant bird or monstrous hybrid, but a woman muffled in black draperies with long, pendant sleeves. Her black hood fallen back revealed, white in the moonlight though stranded with gleaming black hair, a triangular face, whose glassily bright eyes and predatory aspect were suggestive of a bird, but also of an evil, oddly beautiful child. She moved in a crouching, short-stepped, fluttering way.

"Three in a night," she cried. "You have killed the third. It is well, falconer."

Stravas could be heard saying in a gasping voice, "I know you. I know you."

Still the falconer advanced, until she said quickly, "What is it? What do you want?" Then the falconer leaped at her with catlike swiftness and advanced the bloody sword so that it glittered redly against the black fabric covering her bosom.

And Fafhrd heard the Mouser say, "Move not, Atya. Nor command your birds to any evil action. Or you will die in a wink, as your falconer and his black pet died."

For five choking heartbeats there was dead silence. Then the woman on the altar began to breathe in an audible, dry, strangled way, and utter short, broken cries that were almost croakings.

Some of the black birds rose from their perches and beat about uncertainly, dipping in and out of the shafts of moonlight, though keeping clear of the altar. The woman began to sway and rock from side to side. The sword followed her unalterably, like a pendulum.

Fafhrd noted the second falconer move up beside him, raising his short sword for a throw. Putting all his strength into one mighty leverage of wrist and forearm, Fafhrd snapped the last of the lashings, ponderously heaved himself and the chair up and forward, caught the falconer's wrist as it started to whip the shortsword forward, and hurtled down with him to the floor. The falconer squealed

in pain and a bone snapped. Fafhrd lay heavily atop him, staring at the leather-masked, gauntleted Mouser and the woman.

"Two falconers in a night," said the Mouser, mimicking the woman. "It is well, Fafhrd." Then he continued pitilessly, "The masquerade is over, Atya. Your vengeance on the highborn women of Lankhmar has come to an end. Ah, but fat Muulsh will be surprised at his little dove! To steal even your own jewels! Almost too cunning, Atya!"

A cry of bitter anguish and utter defeat came from the woman, in which her humiliation and weakness showed naked. But then she ceased to sway and a look of utter desperation tightened her decadent face.

"To the Mountains of Darkness!" she cried out wildly. "To the Mountains of Darkness! Bear Tyaa's tribute to Tyaa's last stronghold!" And she followed this with a series of strange whistles and trillings and screams.

At this all the birds rose together, though still keeping clear of the altar. They milled wildly, giving vent to varied squawlings, which the woman seemed to answer.

"No tricks now, Atya!" said the Mouser. "Death is close."

Then one of the black fowl dipped to the floor, clutched an emerald-studded bracelet, rose again, and beat with it through a deep embrasure in that wall of the temple which overlooked the River Hlal. One after another, the other birds followed its example.

As if in some grotesque ritual procession, they sailed out into the night, bearing a fortune in their claws: necklaces, brooches, rings and pins of gold, silver, and electrum set with all colors of jewels, palely rich in the moonlight.

After the last three for whom no jewels were left vanished, Atya raised her black-draped arms toward the two outjutting sculptures of winged women, as if imploring a miracle, gave voice to a mad lonely wail, recklessly sprang from the altar, and ran after the birds.

The Mouser did not strike, but followed her, his sword dangerously close. Together they plunged into the embrasure. There was another cry, and after a little the Mouser returned alone and came over to Fafhrd. He cut Fafhrd's

bonds, and pulled away the chair, helping him up. The injured falconer did not move, but lay whimpering softly.

"She sprang into the Hlal?" asked Fafhrd, his throat dry. The Mouser nodded.

Fafhrd dazedly rubbed his forehead. But his mind was clearing, as the effects of the poison waned.

"Even the names were the same," he mumbled softly. "Atya and Tyaa!"

The Mouser went toward the altar and began to saw at the lashings of the cutpurse. "Some of your men tried to pepper me tonight, Stravas," he said lightly. "I had no easy time eluding them and finding my way up the choked stairs."

"I am sorry for that—now," said Stravas.

"They were your men too, I suppose, who went jewel-stealing to Muulsh's house tonight?"

Stravas nodded, uncramping loosened limbs. "But I hope we're allies now," he answered, "though there's no loot to share, except for some worthless glass and gewgaws." He laughed grimly. "Was there no way to get rid of those black demons without losing all?"

"For a man plucked from the beak of death, you are very greedy, Stravas," said the Mouser. "But I suppose it's your professional training. No, I for one am glad the birds have fled. Most of all I feared they would get out of hand—as would surely have happened had I killed Atya. Only she could control them. Then we'd have died surely. Observe how Fafhrd's arm is swollen."

"Perhaps the birds will bring the treasure back," said Stravas hopefully.

"I do not think so," answered the Mouser.

Two nights later, Muulsh the money-lender, having learned something of these matters from a broken-armed falconer who had long been employed to care for his wife's songbirds, sprawled comfortably on the luxurious bed in his wife's room. One pudgy hand clasped a goblet of wine, the other that of a pretty maid who had been his wife's hairdresser.

"I never really loved her," he said, pulling the demurely

smiling wench toward him. "It was only that she used to goad and frighten me."

The maid gently disengaged her hand.

"I just want to hang the coverings on those cages," she explained. "Their eyes remind me of hers." And she shivered delicately under her thin tunic.

When the last songbird was shrouded and silent, she came back and sat on his knee.

Gradually the fear left Lankhmar. But many wealthy women continued to wear silver cages over their features, considering it a most enchanting fashion. Gradually style altered the cages to soft masks of silver network.

And some time afterwards the Mouser said to Fafhrd, "There is a thing I have not told you. When the creature leaped into the Hlal, it was full moonlight. Yet somehow my eyes lost her as she fell, and I saw no splash whatever, although I peered closely. Then, as I lifted my head, I saw the end of that ragged procession of birds across the moon. Behind them came, I thought, a very much larger bird, flapping strongly."

"And you think——" asked Fafhrd.

"Why, I think she fell into the Hlal," said the Mouser.